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July 22, 1981

Dear Reader:

Every now and then a character in a story reminds us of a person we've actually known.

In this issue, for instance, Clem in Herschel Cozine's "Murder on Tape" rings a certain bell, as do the paranoid characters, male (in Celia Dale's "The Listening") and female (in Fay Grissom's "Just Deserts"). And while you may not know any Hollywood stunt men to compare him with, you can trust Steve Holt in "Just a Gag" to be the genuine article, as devised by Tex Hill, himself a Hollywood stunt man. If Inspector Saito in "A Small Oversight" and Joe Huck and Stan Percival in "Back Where We've Never Been" seem familiar, it's because you've met them before in the pages of *AHMM*, in previous stories in these series by Seiko Legru and William Bankier.

Good reading.

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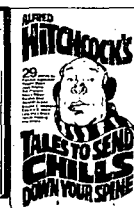
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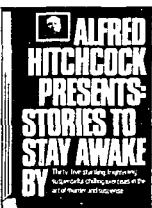
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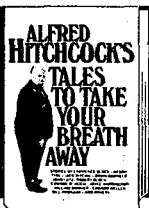
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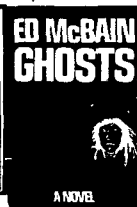
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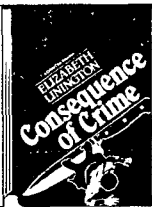
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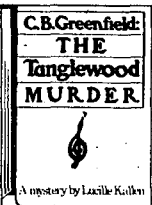
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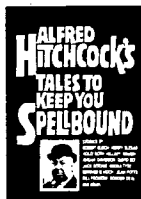
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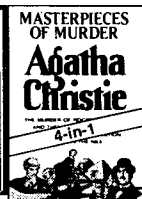
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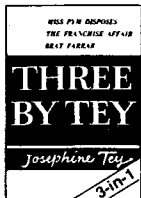
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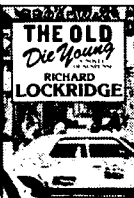
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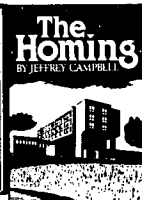
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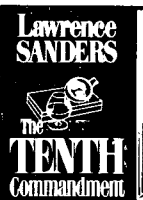
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Wendy was well known for not pulling her punches . . .

# SUSPENSE



When he heard the helicopter directly overhead, he stopped still beside the massive teakwood desk. Then, pivoting, Kurt Timmons ran for the half-open doorway of his spacious paneled den. From the threshold he could see clean across the vast, stark living room and out the high wide-view window. A chopper, the familiar network logo emblazoned on its tail, was chuffing down out of the crisp autumn afternoon.

Before it settled on the slanting acre of lawn, Timmons turned his back



on the vista and grabbed the den door shut. After locking it, he returned the brass key to the pocket of his khaki slacks. He took a deep breath, smoothed back his dark curly hair, and strolled to the front door. There was an odd, quirky smile on his tanned face.

A bulky man in sky-blue coveralls was already out of the copter, helping the slim raven-haired woman to disembark. She came out handsome legs first, the brisk wind playing with her short tweed skirt. Two shaggy-haired young men, one bearing a portable video camera, the other decked with sound equipment, followed her. The four, with the dark pretty woman in the lead, marched up across the estate grounds toward Timmons' mansion.

He opened the door before they reached it and looked out. "Was there something?"

The woman—she was thirty-seven and nearly as tan as he was—laughed. "I've heard about you," she said, holding out her hand. "You're a great kidder."

"You must be looking for Gurney Mott up the road. All of Westport, Connecticut, is in awe of his ready wit and—"

"I love banter, but I want to get this damn interview in the can." She circled him and stepped into the house.

"Ah, you must be Wendy Wales," he said. "I clean forgot you were due today."

"Sure—I'll bet." Wendy Wales, hands on her narrow hips, stood in the center of the white-and-black living room, scanning it. "Thirty-five million potential book buyers watch my show. Your publishers have tried cajolery, wheedling, near-seduction, and even out-and-out bribery to get some of their hopeless hacks on it."

"You can't be bought, huh?"

"I wouldn't be worth much if I could, Kurt. I'm doing you because you're hot. Your latest suspense novel—gee, I've got a blank on the damn title—"

"*The Dinglehoffe Gambit*," he supplied.

"Right," said Wendy. "It's been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly half a year. You just sold the paperback reprints for two and a half million bucks."

"An exaggeration," said Timmons, watching her technicians troop into his mansion. "These are hard times. I had to settle for one and three quarter million. Honest."



Wendy laughed, nodding her pretty head. "That's good—that's fine. Keep up that kind of wiseacre stuff when we're taping. Fifty percent of my audience will automatically hate you for your success—you might as well give 'em good reason."

"I was being truthful."

"Sure." She pointed at the cameraman and then the soundman. "Both named Ed. Makes things easier."

"I would've thought it—"

"Is that the way he talks?" asked Ed the soundman.

"You'll have to compensate for it, Ed."

"My voice is pleasingly deep and mellow," Kurt said.

"You talk through your nose. Don't worry, we can fix it." She was moving around the big room in ever-widening circles. "What do you think, Ed?"

"Dull," said Ed the cameraman.

The third man said, "Gives us a sort of spartan mood though, Wendy."

"Where do you work?" she asked Timmons.

"In the den, over there." He absently patted the pocket that held the key.

"Maybe we ought to use that."

"I'd prefer to tape the interview out here."

"Why?"

"I'm superstitious about where I work—about having outsiders seeing where I do my stuff."

"You're letting forty million people into your damn house."

"But not into my den." Timmons crossed to a low white sofa and sat on it. "We'll do it here."

The cameraman was looking at Timmons and the sofa through his camera. "Dull."

Wendy went and sat close to Timmons. "Do I brighten it up?"

"Some."

"How about sound, Ed?"

The soundman was on his hands and knees, returning from a wall plug. Now he hooked a tiny mike to the collar of Timmons' checkered shirt. "Know in a second."

"I think the overall look, Wendy—the white walls and drab furniture—is a neat contrast with his colorful books," said the third man as he settled into a black wing-chair.

Wendy sighed. "O.K., we don't have time to futz. We'll do it here. Where's the damn book?"

"*The Dinglehoffer Gambit*?"

"I sure don't mean the Gideon Bible, Kurt."

"Over on the end table there." He started to get up.

"Sit," Wendy ordered. "Ed'll get it."

The soundman deserted his gear to fetch the fat hardcover suspense novel. "I just about finished this," he said, handing it to Timmons. "The scenes in Budapest in 1944 are very convincing."

"They are, yes," agreed Timmons, resting the novel on his knee.

Wendy gently slapped it off. "Sit it on the coffee table when we start," she said. "Then I'll pick it up and hand it to you. At least it's got red on the cover."

"Swastika's going to play nice too," commented Ed the cameraman.

Wendy leaned back and shut her eyes for a few seconds. "O.K., let's do one," she said, coming alive and smiling into the camera. "In this final portion of tonight's show we'll be talking with the most successful suspense writer in America. From his first novel—Cut! I can't remember the damn title of that one either."

Timmons said, "*The Bildocker Strategy* was my first. Then came *The Hermansdorfer Defense*. *The Dinglehoffer Gambit* is my third."

She nodded. "Check—O.K. I've got it." She smiled and the camera resumed running. "For this segment of tonight's show I'm at home with the most successful suspense writer in the world. His first novel, *The Bildocker Strategy*, was an international bestseller, earning him over \$24,000,000 to—"

"Twenty-two, actually," put in Timmons.

"He's very truthful and honest is Mr. Kurt Timmons. His second novel, *The Hermansdorfer Defense*, did even better, and his latest, *The Dinglehoffer Gambit*, bids fair to being one of the most successful suspense novels of all time."

She leaned toward Timmons and smiled at him. "How does it feel to be so fantastically successful at such an early age?"

"Actually, Wendy, I'm thirty-seven, and I worked a lot of years before I had my first big one."

She said, "I think our viewers would like to see just exactly how you work, Kurt. Could we get a glimpse of your studio?"

"Perhaps later," he said, grinning and not moving.

She tapped her fingers on the copy of the novel. "I'm pretty well known for not pulling my punches," she said. "So let's try for some controversial stuff. I'd like to talk about your relationship with Leon Saxon."

"You make it sound like an illicit love affair."

Wendy frowned off camera at the man in the wing-chair. "What I meant was, until you came along Saxon was the acknowledged master of the international suspense field you now dominate," she said. "His novel, *The Eisengruber Ploy*, was the bestselling thriller of all time—until your book."

"True."

"Some critics have noted similarities between your work and Saxon's. Coincidence?"

Timmons rubbed his hand on his knee. "I thought perhaps you'd bring up the matter of Leon Saxon," he said slowly and carefully. "As we've been sitting here getting to know each other, Wendy, I've come to a decision."

She studied his tanned face. "Are you kidding me? I know you're noted for your deadpan humor."

"No, no, this is sincere," he assured her. "You really are good with people and, well, listen—I'm going to have to tell this all sooner or later. I might as well unburden with you."

"This has to do with Leon Saxon?"

"With him, with me, with why our novels are so similar," he replied. "It's a somewhat complicated story, Wendy, but I can fit it into the time we have. It'll make a first, an exclusive for you."

"Go ahead," she urged. The camera came in closer to Timmons."

I was married a good deal in my twenties (Timmons began). When I realized the names of all my wives had rhymed—Lilly, Millie, Billie—I decided to call a moratorium on marriage. Quitting my job with the Greater Manhattan Credit Agency, I moved into a seedy apartment on the fringes of Greenwich Village and devoted myself to freelance writing. The first six months I managed to sell an article on self-flagellation to a girlie magazine called *Buttocks*, a crossword puzzle about American Indians to *Jack & Jill*, and a suspense paperback to Bathtub Books. What with rent, household expenses, and alimony to Lilly, Millie, and Billie, my savings account was swiftly dwindling.

It was about this time I first noticed the suspense novels of Leon Saxon.

Every damn bookstore I passed had mounds of his fat bestselling hardcovers in their display windows. And there were all those images of Saxon himself, smirking and leering from the backs of the jackets. He was always bedecked with cameras, claiming he'd visited all the fabulous foreign cities he wrote about in his novels of World War II intrigue.

I hated him.

Once I went inside one of the bookstores, an enormous palace on Fifth Avenue, and pretended I was someone else. I demanded a copy of my paperback and the clerk told me the book didn't exist. He even opened up the latest *Books In Print* to prove it. On my way out I managed to swipe a copy of Saxon's current one, *The Kockenlocker Syndrome*. That evening, huddled in front of the oven in my freezing shabby apartment, I began reading the thing.

It didn't seem fair. Saxon wrote no better than I did. Sure, he seemed to know his 1940s Europe, but his prose was flat. Still, the guy was earning millions while I owed Lilly more than four hundred dollars and Millie over six hundred. I made up my mind I was going to topple Saxon. Kurt Timmons was going to have heaps of *his* books in every damn bookshop in the damn country.

"So you set out to ape Saxon's style and format?" asked Wendy.

"Well, I had meant to, but then I encountered Corliss Knapp," he said. "That's K-n-a-p-p. She pronounced it Kuh-nap."

"I don't think I know who she—"

"Few people do."

I met Corliss three years ago (Timmons continued). No—four, almost. In Manhattan. It was the annual awards banquet for the Committed Writers of America at the Taft Hotel. I'd never been to a macrobiotic banquet before and I was sort of dawdling over my meal. I wasn't actually much of a committed writer either, but an editor friend who couldn't buy anything from me had sent me a free ticket. I never turned down a meal in those days.

A very pretty young woman took the seat next to mine. She was slim and auburn-haired, and she'd commenced chattering while still lowering herself into the chair. "I'm always late. It's odd too, because I got up earlier than I usually do. People tell me I'm just destined to be late all the time. Not that I know all that many people, being shy most of the

time and a recluse sort of except I seem to be always going out to parties and dinners and such. What I'm really more like is a hermit, I guess. You know, who lives in a cave. Except my flat in Soho isn't a cave, though you could sure grow mushrooms there without any help. Hi."

"Hello," I responded. "I'm—"

"My name is Corliss Knapp. That's K-n-a-p-p, pronounced Kuh-napp. Although why am I telling you how to pronounce it when you just heard me say it? I do all sorts of odd things like that. Partly, I believe, because I was an orly child. 'One like you is enough,' my late father told me. Did you ever know of anyone who was killed by a falling gargoyle? He was. On Lex and Forty-ninth when they were remodeling a bank. The bank was very considerate—paid for his funeral, gave me a digital clock and a toaster.

"Living with my uncle, Balzac Knapp, didn't help my character much either. I had to move in with him after my father was felled. He was a very eccentric man, Uncle Balzac, and then his car blew up. With him in it. He was a retired spy."

Thus began my relationship with Corliss. It wasn't exactly a romance, although we were fond of each other and spent a good deal of time together. She really was an attractive girl and her name didn't rhyme with Lilly. She had a tendency to prattle, but I'm a good listener. It was during one of her monologues that I came upon the knowledge that would catapult me to the position of America's top suspense writer.

"I actually know him," she told me. "It was the strangest sensation, watching Wendy Wales interview him on television. Not that I much like Wendy Wales, she's so superficial and mock-sincere. And that hair. If I had a wig like hers I'd return it and tell them to give it back to the cat. But, since I'm trying to break into the pages of the *National Lampoon* with my cartoons, I have to be up on what all the fools in the country are into, right? That was what Uncle Balzac always said. Get to know the locals. He was with the OSS, you know, which was something we had before the CIA, and he was in that too, and some other government organizations that were so secret they didn't even have initials."

"Who was it you saw on the show?" I managed to ask.

This was late on a winter Friday in a booth of a Mexican restaurant on Bleeker. Soft snow was drifting down outside.

"Leon Saxon, who else? I know you loathe him, professional jealousy and all. But you should've watched—you can never get to know your

opponent too well. Uncle Balzac always said that. He was a tricky man, and smart. Which is the point."

"Point of what, Corliss?"

"Leon Saxon. I know him. He's the man who pretended to be a CIA agent after Uncle Balzac blew up in the garage and nearly half the house burned down. I was perplexed and distracted those next few days, arranging for the funeral, wiping soot off what was left, and he claimed he was the CIA and flashed some sort of ID. The more I think of it, the more certain I am it was fake."

"I've read up on Saxon," I said. "He was never with any government agency. If he had been, he'd be crowing about it."

"Not necessarily. You aren't supposed to write books if you've been a spy. They're afraid you'll give away all sorts of secrets, which is why Uncle Balzac wrote only for his own fun."

"This uncle of yours wrote suspense novels?"

She nodded. "Didn't I mention that? It's almost certainly one of the reasons I like you. I just naturally seem to enjoy people who write about international intrigue so—"

"Wait now," I cut in. "Are you saying your late uncle wrote some novels? And Leon Saxon took them?"

"He certainly looks exactly like the man who did. He flashed this fake ID and told me he was with the CIA and they had to take away all Uncle Balzac's papers, because it was SOP. Which means Standard—"

"I know. This guy took how many book manuscripts?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen! Sixteen complete novels?"

"When he retired from the CIA he had more than enough money to live on, so he amused himself by writing these terrific novels. As he finished each one he'd put it in a cardboard carton in his den. Writing was for him what knitting is for some people. He never even bothered to have them typed or anything. He wrote them all in longhand on yellow legal tablets in his very neat handwriting. I have a scratchy penmanship, even when I draw, and I really envied Uncle Balzac his handwriting. When I lived with him he let me read several of the novels and they were really good and I told him he ought to see if there was some way he could have them published. But he said he didn't want the CIA poking around and he didn't want to be a professional writer anyway."

"Have you read Saxon's new one?"

She said, "The first chapter. I stopped in a bookshop on the way over here, which is why I was a few minutes late. Well, that and I misplaced one of my mittens. I had to look all through the—"

"Did you recognize the chapter?"

"Yes," she said. "Almost word for word, as I remember."

I sat back, smiling broadly. "Corliss, Leon Saxon is a plagiarist."

"He certainly is," she agreed. "Except I've been pondering it, Kurt, and I don't see, since he took all the manuscripts and notes, how we can ever prove it."

"I'll prove it," I assured her.

Getting the goods on Leon Saxon wasn't all that difficult. It didn't require even the ingenuity of a secret agent in one of his novels—in one of Uncle Balzac's novels, that is.

Through a friend of mine left behind at the credit outfit I did some digging into Saxon's background and learned he never was with Central Intelligence. He'd been living in South Norwalk, Connecticut, when he'd met Corliss's uncle a few years before. Like me, he'd been making a second-rate living grinding out romance paperbacks, usually \$2,000 per book and no royalties. He augmented his writing income by teaching creative writing at various Adult Ed night classes in Fairfield County.

The six-week course he taught at the Westport YMCA attracted a male high school English teacher, two housewives, a teenage boy who weighed just under three hundred pounds and wanted to follow in the footsteps of Ray Bradbury, and Uncle Balzac. Uncle Balzac sat in on the course mostly to amuse himself. He never submitted any of his work for criticism and analysis. One evening, however, he and Saxon had a couple of drinks together down at the Arrow and Corliss's ex-spy uncle talked about his novels. After a few rounds he invited Saxon over to his house—this was before Corliss's father had been felled by the gargoyles and she wasn't in residence with her uncle.

When Saxon read the first chapter of the first novel in the pile, even numbed by a few drinks he realized Uncle Balzac was an infinitely better writer than he was. The book was packed with suspense, rich in first-hand local color about Europe, and deft in its handling of the political intrigues of the Nineteen Forties and early Fifties. Always eager to turn an extra buck, Saxon offered to act as his literary agent. There were



sixteen novels in all and he was betting they were all equally good and all saleable.

But it could only be a hobby for Corliss's uncle. He just wanted to write for his own amusement. That was it.

To a confirmed scuffer like Leon Saxon, who'd never been able to write just for the fun of it, Balzac Knapp's attitude seemed idiotic.

Five months later Uncle Balzac suffered his fatal accident.

Wendy made a nervous gasping sound. "Are you hinting that Leon Saxon murdered the man? Killed him so he could get his hands on these potentially valuable manuscripts?"

"Oh, no," said Timmons, grinning. "I'm only accusing Saxon of fraud, theft, and plagiarism."

Saxon posed as a CIA agent come to clamp down a lid of security (Timmons went on). He got the whole lot of sixteen handwritten novels plus all the notes and related papers.

He spent the next week in his apartment and read every word of all the novels. He was stunned—awed. This crusty fifty-six-year-old ex-spy had been able to turn out a string of books better than anything Saxon could ever produce. But he had them now.

He was cautious. He waited anxiously for two full months, to be absolutely certain Corliss had truly been conned, then he proceeded. Saxon was an excellent typist and he turned out a nice clean copy of the first book in under two weeks. That was *The Hickenlooper Bypass*.

The second publisher he showed it to offered him \$25,000—the price of twelve and a half paperbacks. Scared inside, he held out for \$40,000. They upped the offer to \$30,000 and he took it.

Well, as you know, that book took off fantastically. It was on the *New York Times* list from the day it appeared, stayed there a full year, and was still on the hardcover list when the paperback edition took the number-one spot on the softcover list.

He realized that by husbanding his store of stolen manuscripts he'd be able to go on for maybe twenty to twenty-five years, getting bigger and bigger advances and more and more peripheral benefits.

The first few months after that first one took off were anxious ones. He was worried about what would happen if Corliss happened to read it. But she apparently didn't, and gradually he came to think of the books as his.

He'd still be thinking that if I hadn't swiped the remaining dozen from him.

Saxon was living well by then—damned well. He had an enormous beachfront mansion in Southport on the Sound. One evening while Saxon was out on the Coast talking over his latest movie deal I broke into the mansion.

There was an alarm system, but it was quite primitive. I'd done enough crime research to be able to outfox it with no real trouble. I was fairly certain he wouldn't store the unused original manuscripts in an obvious place like the big safe in his redwood-paneled study—a room, by the way, larger than my entire apartment and full of books, phonograph records, and expensive cameras. I was right. They were stashed, each wrapped in brown paper, in a cabinet in his game room, mixed with other similar-looking parcels, all marked "Tax Records." Stuffing them in a laundry sack I borrowed from his sparkling laundry room, I departed.

At home in my tacky apartment I read one of the novels. The manuscript was in Balzac Knapp's handwriting, each page dated. There was absolutely no way Leon Saxon could ever dare claim them—any of them—as his.

This was absolute proof that he had indeed stolen his whole career from Corliss's uncle. With a good attorney she ought to be able to collect plenty from Saxon.

But suppose I typed up this book myself? I might be able to get twenty or thirty thousand for it—more than I could earn in a year of hustling paperback assignments. Hell—more than I could earn in *two* scrabbling years.

The trouble was Corliss. She had a strong sense of justice, of what's right and what's wrong. If any more of these books were to be published I knew she'd insist Balzac Knapp's name appear as the author. And if the CIA ever got wind of that they might *really* swoop down and grab the manuscripts.

So I lied to Corliss.

I told her I hadn't been able to find a thing.

That first appropriated novel was *The Bildocker Strategy* and it was more successful than anything Saxon had ever put out under his name. Incredible amounts of money started coming my way. I gave up my apartment on the fringes of the Village and bought this place. Everything went beautifully. I even believed Corliss wasn't going to have time—being so busy pursuing her cartooning—to read it.

She came out to see me often. One lovely autumn afternoon we went for a hike in a nature preserve over in Weston called Devil's Den.

"It's so idyllic and primeval, just the two of us, climbing this rocky hillside hand-in-hand," Corliss said. "No one around, no problems. It's like life must've been in the Garden of Eden, although I wonder if they had maple trees and those little prickly weeds there. But they had two of everything, didn't they? Or was that on the Ark? Why'd you do it?"

"Do what?" I asked her. I glanced down into the rocky ravine on our right.

"Steal Uncle Balzac's books."

"I didn't. You've got me mixed up with—"

"C'mon, don't con me, Kurt. We're old pals and we shouldn't lie to each other. You *did* find the manuscripts that night, and you took them. Maybe, since I'm sure there's a scrap of decency in you, you really and truly intended to return them to me and help me expose Saxon, but the temptation was too great. You'd been envying Saxon for so long and now you had a way to imitate his success and catch up with him. It was borrowed plumage, but you'd look good in it, you decided."

"You're uncle's dead. The money from the books won't help him," I told her. "Look, I'm sorry I lied to you. We can split all the profits fifty-fifty. Although, since I did sell the book, maybe I ought to get a slightly larger—"

"No, I couldn't do that." She shook her head. "It simply isn't honest. I'm nothing without my integrity. If it was money I wanted I'd simply have blackmailed Leon Saxon. What I'm seeking is justice. We have to bring this sorry mess out into the open, alert the media, make the truth known."

"I can't do that, Corliss. For one thing, it would stop my income."

"You have to have faith in yourself. I'm sure a book you write yourself could be nearly as good as—"

"No!" I shouted.

She lost her balance then and went falling down into the rockstrewn ravine.

I scrambled down after her and—made sure she was dead.

While I was bending over her I thought I heard something from above—a faint scraping and then a click. I straightened up, looked around, saw nothing.

The day was fading when I left Corliss. I went running back toward

the entryway to the preserve, shouting and sobbing, "Help! Help! There's been a terrible accident!"

Where I made my mistake was in underestimating Leon Saxon. He'd been doing some investigative work himself and, by various means, had found out a good deal about me. After he read *The Bildocker Strategy* he knew I was the one Corliss had told about the manuscripts. He began patiently tracking us and was in Devil's Den, moving quietly in our wake, on the afternoon she fell to her death.

Of course the camera-laden bastard had taken pictures. He didn't intend to turn me in, only to use the photos of me using a stone on Corliss's skull to get what he wanted.

When he came to call on me he had the photographs and the negatives on him. "There are still nine manuscripts left," he said in that smirky voice of his. He was gloating as he sat facing me across my teakwood desk. "That's the price of these photos and negatives."

"All nine, huh?" I said.

"You dumped me from the bestseller list." He tapped the incriminating photos on the edge of the desk. "I need to get back. But I'm realistic enough to know I can't do it without the Balzac Knapp manuscripts. I tried a novel on my own and—" He shuddered.

"Nope," I told him, "those books are going to appear as Kurt Timmons novels."

"Royalties won't do you any good in prison, my boy," Saxon countered, "and that's exactly where you'll be, doing life for murder. Maybe, considering your literary reputation, you'll only have to serve twenty or thir—ooof!"

I'd stood up and smashed a heavy stone paperweight down on his skull.

His pudgy chin whacked the desk top and his eyes fluttered. I hit him again. Twice more. Then again.

His skull made crackling, crunching noises and he slumped to the floor, the pictures falling free from his dead fingers.

I gathered them up, frisked him, and took the negatives.

Stepping around his body, I threw them all into the study fireplace and burned them up.

There were several seconds of dead air. Finally Wendy asked, "Why are you confiding all this to me?"

"Because Leon Saxon called on me this very afternoon." Timmons stood

up. "Just as I was watching the photos and negatives turn to ashes I heard your helicopter arriving. I locked the den and put on a smiling face to greet you and your crew, but I realize there's no way I can keep what I've done hidden—not with all of you here."

Wendy took a deep breath, then laughed tentatively. "I get it—this is one of your pranks," she said. "The whole yarn is a put-on, isn't it?"

Timmons crossed to the door of the den and unlocked it. He beckoned to her and the cameraman. "Come on," he invited. "Take a look."



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*Takegaki's murder was outdated, so to speak . . .*

# A SMALL OVERSIGHT

by  
SEIKO  
LEGRUEN



Inspector Saito looked at the short, broad-shouldered laborer with some surprise.

"Did you commit a murder?"

"No, Saito-san, I didn't say that. I said that I smashed that fellow Takegaki's head with a crowbar."

The laborer spoke the singsong Kyoto dialect contentedly, rubbing his calloused hands. "But that's not the point. Takegaki has been dead a long

time. He's been buried in concrete for twelve years. He's outdated, so to speak."

The precise characters in which the Japanese Book of Criminal Law is printed appeared as if on a small screen in the Inspector's head. *Article 23: Manslaughter—the statute of limitations is twelve years.* He put up his hand. "One moment, Masao-san. Would you mind describing how the death of—what was your victim's name again? Takegaki?—of Takegaki-san took place?"

Masao leaned forward on the plastic chair opposite Saito's small desk. He smiled helpfully. "That Takegaki wasn't in the boss's regular employ. We were building a factory and that fellow was making fun of me. The night before I had been partying with some of the boys—we got some girls, but the girls wanted nothing to do with me. They all wanted to do something with Takegaki. He was a smart sort of fellow with grease on his hair and a little moustache and a leather jacket. The girls like that sort of thing. Me, they sometimes call me Frog because I'm wide all over and I have this round head. When my buddies call me that I just laugh, but I could never take it from Takegaki. Follow?"

Saito nodded. "Yes, go on."

"So we were at the building site and Takegaki was imitating me, hopping around, croaking like a frog, and suddenly I grabbed that crowbar. With me swinging it, I thought he would shut up but he just went on hopping and croaking. 'Let's see what you're going to do to me, Frog,' he said. 'See if you dare.' Well, that was it."

"You hit him?" Saito asked.

"Right. On the head. Just once, but his brains were all over. There was a water pump nearby with plenty of pressure and I cleaned up nicely afterward."

"And the body?"

Masao grinned widely. "What do you think? I was in luck. We had been pouring concrete so all I had to do was dump him into it, push a little, and tamp the surface down neatly."

Inspector Saito sighed. Confessions were often based on complete nonsense. He hadn't trusted this one when the sergeant phoned him from the hall desk at police headquarters. "Funny business, Inspector-san. A man says he killed somebody and is complaining about blackmail. Could you take care of it?"

As the youngest inspector of the murder squad, Saito often functioned



as a garbage can. Perhaps he only had to listen to what his visitor wanted to say and somehow calm him and send him home.

Once they'd talked, however, he could see it wouldn't be that easy. Masao didn't seem to be overly intelligent but could easily be classified as an "honest skilled laborer." He wasn't hysterical or a neurotic intellectual type. If he claimed to have brained somebody twelve years ago he might very well have done so.

An outdated manslaughter, thought Saito. How do I handle this? He took out his notebook. "Where can we find the corpse, Masao-san?"

"Suido 1-chome, 2, Bunkyo-ku," said Masao. "I'm working in the same area again and pass the address every day in the bus. It's a nice building—we did a good job. Some company is manufacturing plastic eyeglass-cases there now. It won't be easy to break that floor. You'll need some heavy equipment, and even with pneumatic drills it will take a little while."

"What floor?"

"Second, in the rear," Masao said. "I can show you the exact spot."

"Why don't you just describe it to me?" said Saito.

"Go in through the front door at the top of the stairs, then walk straight ahead until you can't go any further, and turn left. He's about a foot from the corner in the rear wall. Don't drill deeper than two inches or you'll hit him. He should be just about the way he was when I put him there—they say concrete preserves well. Even his moustache should be in perfect shape."

A muscle in Saito's cheek moved. "Weren't the victim's relatives concerned about his whereabouts?"

Masao offered him a cigarette. Saito refused but flicked his lighter. Masao sucked in smoke. "No, he had no family at all. I was in luck there too. And nobody knew he was working that day because he kept to his own schedule. When he never showed up again the boys wondered what had happened to him, but I played dumb."

"On the day that you, uh, beat him to death," Saito asked, "didn't anyone see him come in?"

"No—with the exception of my buddy, Togawa, that is."

Saito wrote down the name and drew a neat line under it. Very nice. A little firmness wouldn't hurt. He would have to write a report containing some facts, at least. "Very well. And Togawa never said a word?"

Masao pursed his thick lips. "No, but he did talk to me. That's why I'm here."

Saito nodded. This would be the blackmail part. The case was shaping up. "Go on, Masao-san."

"Listen, Inspector-san. Togawa was my mate, right? We had been working together for quite a while. We always got on well together, maybe because we were different. He read a bit, and he had ideas—he still has ideas. He wanted to work for himself and after a while he did. He has a business in metal now—tubes and stuff, second-hand material. Sometimes it's lifted, but I don't care about that. If he wants to buy stuff that's found somewhere, that's up to him. But I *do* care if he comes to me to collect rent for twelve years. You follow?"

"Collect rent?" Saito asked.

"Yeah. I pay enough rent and now I can't even get married because Togawa gets half my wages—after taxes, not before taxes—which is good for him, because if he wanted that much I would have brained *him* too. He's clever. He doesn't take more than he can."

"Blackmail complaint," Saito wrote on a clean page of his notebook. He had also written down the date of the crime, February 28, twelve years ago. One outdated manslaughter and one workable blackmail continuing into the present. He put down his ballpoint and looked into Masao's eyes. "Can you prove the blackmail?"

"Yes." Masao picked up a parcel he'd placed under his chair. He unfolded the cotton wrap printed with a half-moon motif, and placed a tape on the desk. "Here, Inspector-san. The last few times Togawa came to collect I taped his voice with a very nice little machine that cost me a lot of bread—I had to buy it on time. I put the recorder behind the screen and hid the microphone in a flower arrangement. Togawa never caught on. The quality of the recording is superb. It contains a lot of bull, of course, because Togawa likes to talk and he always wants a drink too. We had regular ceremonies every month and afterward I would give him the money—but never freely, he always had to ask for it. Then he would thank me and count it. That's on the tape too, rustle rustle, a very clear microphone, you know, you can actually hear him touch the money. How's that for proof? Why don't you play it?"

Saito looked at his watch. It was almost lunchtime and he was more interested in getting that corpse out. "Later, Masao-san."

Masao got up and bowed. "You will be impressed by the tape, In-

spector-san, and Togawa cannot deny that it's his voice. Are you going to arrest him?"

Saito bowed too. "You'll hear from us. I have your address, and I know where we can find Togawa-san."

"If he isn't home he usually hangs out in the Butterfly Bar, giving my money to the girls. That joint is much too expensive for the likes of us, but Togawa is a big shot these days. His business is going well and he's got half my wages on top of it. But that part's all over now. I paid him for the last time yesterday. Do you think I can get some of it back, Inspector-san?"

"You'll hear from us," Saito said again and walked his guest as far as the elevator. When the door closed after Masao he walked back to his office, shaking his head.

"Good evening, Masao," said the attractive girl who welcomed him to the Butterfly Bar. She led the way and he appraised her with pleasure. Nice girl, thought Masao. Maybe I'll get to know her better tonight, unless they have others that are even better-looking. He had paid a lot of attention to his appearance and was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and necktie. He had shaved carefully and brushed his nails as well as he could—there was only a little dirt left in the corners.

Sitting down on a barstool, he ordered a double Suntori whiskey. The girl, dressed in a hand-painted kimono with parallel orange stripes which accentuated her trim body, smiled and brought him a dish of nuts. Masao called to the bartender, "Give my girl friend something tasty."

He and the girl were getting on well when Togawa entered the bar and Masao regretted having to interrupt the conversation.

Togawa grinned widely. "Well, what do you know? This is quite a surprise, old buddy—let's see what you're drinking. Bartender, let me have one of those and another for my friend."

The girl got up and Togawa took over her stool. "Drop in on us again when you have time, darling," he said.

"Of course I will. Have a good time together—you must be old friends."

"You're dead right," Masao said. The strong liquor was already affecting him. His cheeks puffed out under his bulging eyes.

Togawa laughed. "You've been at it for a little while, I see. Are you celebrating something?"

Masao raised his drink. "I wasn't—but it's different now that you're here."

"That's the way I like to hear it," Togawa said. "We were friends, we stay friends. You know, I expected you to be here—isn't that strange? You never come here, but tonight I expected to see you. When I was walking here I thought, Masao is coming tonight too. I was quite sure of it."

"Is that a fact?" said Masao.

"Yes—so you see what good friends we are? I'm completely tuned in to you. Well, what shall we do? Have a party? Tonight everything is on me—just tell me what you want and I'll take care of it."

Masao laughed so hard he choked. The bar girl hit him on the back and Togawa got him a glass of water.

"Boy," whispered Masao, rubbing his eyes, "I haven't had so much fun in a long time. The way you said that. So you'll order me anything I want, right? Maybe I'll find you something too, a nice quiet little room where you can amuse yourself."

"Easy," Togawa said, "or you'll choke again. Come on, let's have another drink."

They drank a toast and became merrier, giggling at the slightest excuse.

The girls at the next bar got up to welcome them. "Kampai, first drink on the house to celebrate the coming spring. What will the gentlemen's pleasure be?"

Masao had recuperated from his first flush of drunkenness and stood steadily on his short legs, but Togawa had gone down into the nebulous spheres. When he tried to hold onto one of the girls while he ordered more whiskey, the girl disengaged herself and he almost fell over but managed to grab onto a tall slender man who had just entered the bar. "Sorry, sir—" he apologized. "The floor here seems to be slanting."

"Good evening," said Inspector Saito. Togawa turned and asked the girl where the restroom was. The Inspector and Masao watched him make his way carefully to the room and struggle with the door's handle.

"What a coincidence," Saito said. "I went to your house but your landlady said you had gone out. When I got to the Butterfly Bar you had just left, and there are so many bars around here I didn't think I'd be able to find you."

Masao shook his broad head. "I'm glad to see you, Inspector." He

pointed to the restroom door. "That's him, Inspector. Are you going to arrest him?"

"Maybe," said Saito, and took the glass the bartender pushed across the counter, "But we can take care of that matter later. Let's have a little chat with him first—or, even better, *you* talk to him and I'll listen. Tell him that he can't blackmail you any more because your crime would be outdated. Look out, here he comes."

"Oh-oh," Togawa greeted Masao. "I better watch it, old buddy. I'm getting really drunk. I'll finish this one and maybe have one more, but then I think we should close the tap. How're you doing?"

"Not badly," Masao said. "Kampai. Let's drink to saying farewell."

Togawa stared at Masao glassily. "Farewell?"

"That's the word, buddy—or don't you know the law?" Masao pounded the counter with every word. "*All civilians are required to know the law.*"

"Law? What law?"

"*The* law, old buddy of mine. Manslaughter cannot be prosecuted after twelve years. Twelve years ago I beat that bloody bastard to death. I did it without thinking about it, on the spur of the moment—that makes it manslaughter. Murder is valid for eighteen years, but it wasn't a murder. That swipe with the crowbar doesn't count any more because twelve years have passed."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it's so. But now *you're* in for it. Blackmail is a crime too, and you're still doing it. That's punishable, brother. It'll take you to jail for a long time. And all that time you can think of me. I'll be in a nice bar with lovely ladies while the rats are nibbling your toes."

"Never," Togawa said.

"Oh, yes."

Togawa moved his stool a little closer to Masao's. "Listen here, buddy, you know what's wrong with you? You're stupid. There's nothing in your fat stupid skull. In there." He tried to put his finger against Masao's forehead. "Sorry, that's your nose—but you don't have any brains there either. You don't have any savvy anywhere. So I blackmailed you for twelve years—you should never have let me get away with it. You killed—what's his name again? Takegaki?—because you were angry with him. How come you could never be that angry with me? Because you were too scared of me. To kill me you must be able to think and you

can't. So you paid instead—every month, right on time. A stupid sucker, that's what you are."

Masao grinned. "Well, this stupid sucker is all done with you now and you can go to jail. Won't that be nice?"

"There's nothing you can do to me," Togawa said. "Blackmail's got to be proved, you know that much. Why don't you try to prove that you gave me half your wages every month just so I'd keep my mouth shut?"

"But I have beautiful proof. I have a whole tape filled with your voice and that tape is on a police inspector's desk right now."

Togawa roared with laughter. "Is that so? And do you know what that silly pig will be listening to? He'll be listening to Dreamy Doku, the pop singer, with electric organ in the background. You never bothered to play that tape back this morning, did you?"

Masao's mouth hung open.

"No, you took it to the police as fast as you could, just like I knew you would. Did you really think I wasn't aware you had a tape recorder in your room? Do you know where I was last night while you were snoring away? I was right next to you, replacing your tape with mine. I know exactly what brand of tapes you use because I checked them when you left the room for a moment last time I was there. Togawa doesn't take any risks, buddy."

Inspector Saito looked at his watch. It was 11:30. He touched the bartender's hand. "Do me a favor, will you? Call the police. Tell them Inspector Saito is asking for assistance and that the matter is urgent."

The bartender nodded, pulled a telephone toward him, and dialed the number. Togawa and Masao were shouting at each other and the bar girls were trying to calm them down.

When two uniformed officers came in, the bartender pointed to Saito.

"Did you have us called, Inspector-san?"

"Yes," Saito got up and put a hand on Togawa's shoulder. "Togawa-san, I am Inspector Saito." He showed his badge. "I am arresting you on suspicion of blackmail. Would you please follow these two officers?"

"Handcuffs, Inspector?" asked one of the cops.

"Yes," Saito said, "why not?"

The officers pushed Togawa off his seat and the handcuffs clicked. "Where do you want him, Inspector-san?"

"Take him to headquarters and tell the sergeant at the desk I'll be there in half an hour."

"Right, sir."

Togawa's legs seemed to be paralyzed as the policemen took him off and Masao turned to Saito. "Did I perform the way you expected me to, Saito-san? The bastard never knew what hit him."

"Yes, you did very well. Togawa is clever all right, but he shouldn't drink so much."

"So there's justice, after all," Masao said. "I was beginning to doubt it, you know. How I've longed for this moment—not to have to pay any more, and Togawa in jail!"

Saito looked at his watch again. "Yes, I can imagine your satisfaction, but, I'm sorry, I'll have to arrest you too."

Masao didn't seem to hear. Saito raised his voice a little. "You're under arrest, Masao-san. I suspect you of killing your colleague, Takegaki. I arrived late tonight because it did indeed take us some time to get through to the corpse. But it was exactly where you indicated it would be. We found the crowbar you used buried with the corpse and have no reason to doubt that matters occurred the way you described them."

"But the whole thing is outdated!" shouted Masao. "That was twelve years ago! There's nothing you can do to me!"

Saito held his watch in front of Masao's eyes. "It's five to twelve, you see? In five minutes it will be March first and you can no longer be prosecuted. But you *can* be today, and we are prosecuting you because you committed your crime less than twelve years ago. We are still in the twelfth year. It is the 29th of February today, and there has been a small and very understandable oversight on your part: Leap year unsettles all of us and we forget about the extra day. My car is outside. You're going with me. I advise you not to resist, because that will only aggravate your position. Can I have the check, bartender? For the gentlemen and myself?"

The August 19 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale July 23.



*The tape represented words from beyond the grave or hard evidence, depending on how you looked at it . . .*

# MURDER ON TAPE

by  
**HERSCHEL  
COZINE**



"It's a case of mistook identity, Chief. Simple as that." Clem waddled to his desk by the door and dropped into the chair with a grunt.

"What are you talking about, Clem?" Cliff said.

"Old Miz Jenkins. She claims she seen Otis Miller comin' outta Jerry's place last night."

"And you don't believe her?"

"She couldn't of seen him, Chief. He says he was home at the time."

"So?"

Clem, the dim-witted deputy of Watson Corners, blinked as he pondered Cliff's remark. "So how could she of seen him?"

"Clem," Cliff sighed, leaning back in his chair and resting his head against the wall, "did it ever occur to you that Otis Miller could be lying?"

Clem blinked again and his forehead creased into a frown. "Don't reckon it did. Why should he?"

"Jerry was murdered last night," Cliff explained with the patience of a schoolteacher lecturing a class of first graders. "Otis was placed at the scene of the crime at the time of the murder."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Put yourself in his place, Clem. Would you admit to being at Jerry's place at the time he was murdered?"

"Shucks, Chief," Clem said. "I wouldn't kill nobody. It's against the law."

Cliff Eldridge closed his eyes and cursed the unknown force that had saddled him with his bearlike deputy. With a restraint he'd developed over the years, he coughed softly into his cupped hand and dropped the subject.

Jerry Gardner's murder had stunned the small community in northern California. One of the town's leading citizens, Gardner had achieved it all in his lifetime—success, wealth, a modicum of fame. He had dined with movie stars and rubbed elbows with political leaders. Most of the residents of Watson Corners had never even seen a celebrity, much less talked to one.

Otis Miller, on the other hand, was not a model citizen. A job tramp, drifter, and drinker, he had been in and out of trouble most of his life. He was Watson Corners' "town character," tolerated or pitied by most of the residents, but there were some who would have him run out of town on the slightest provocation.

If Otis's detractors were ever going to be stirred into action, Gardner's murder would be the catalyst. Gardner was found in the study of his brownstone home, sprawled on the expensive carpet with a knife through his heart. His empty wallet was lying a few feet away and the desk drawers were standing open, their contents spread around the room.

There was a tape recorder on the desk, still whirring, although the tape had run to the end. Cliff rewound it and played it back.

Gardner's reedy voice, weakened by age and failing health, rasped over

the scratchy background. "Memo to Nora. Regarding the property in San Rafael, I would like the following draft to be prepared for my signature—Otis! What are you doing? Put that down!"

There was the sound of a scuffle followed by a stifled groan and a dull thud, probably Gardner's body hitting the floor. Drawers opened, papers rustled, then a door slammed and footsteps receded, leaving silence for the rest of the tape.

So there it was. Words from beyond the grave, if one wanted to get poetic. Hard evidence if one chose the legal route.

The tape recording, damning as it was to Otis Miller, was only part of the case against him. Thelma Jenkins, Gardner's neighbor, reported that she had seen Otis running from the house shortly before the body was discovered.

It had fallen on Cliff Eldridge as Sheriff of Watson Corners to arrest Otis Miller. Dulled by a night of heavy drinking, Otis offered no resistance. But by the time they had reached the jail he had sobered up enough to realize what was happening and to protest his innocence. And Clem, at least, believed him.

With Otis behind bars, Cliff took time out for a quick breakfast before setting out to see Thelma Jenkins for a formal statement. Having been too busy with the murder investigation, he had let Clem question Thelma. The report was, to say the least, lacking in vital information.

Thelma's house, a small, well kept frame structure on a hill overlooking Gardner's home, had a large picture window with a panoramic view of the neighborhood. It was from this window that she chronicled the comings and goings of her neighbors with a passion that most of them took good-naturedly. Some had even started to wave to her in the morning when they left and to watch for her when they returned in the evening.

Cliff wondered as he stepped along the flagstone walk leading to the porch how Mrs. Jenkins could afford the luxury of living in such a nice neighborhood. Most of the homes were in the \$100,000 bracket, with Gardner's worth at least twice that. Shrugging it off as no concern of his, he climbed the brick steps to her door and reached for the bell.

The door opened before he had a chance to push the button, and Mrs. Jenkins, small and birdlike, with hunched shoulders wrapped in a shawl, motioned him inside. "I guess you want my statement all nice and official-like for your records," she said with a note of disdain.

"If I may," Cliff answered.

"Well, I already told your deputy, Mr. Blimpo, everything," she said. "Wimpole," Cliff corrected her. "I know it's tedious, Mrs. Jenkins, but I must ask you some questions. Your testimony is crucial to the case."

Mrs. Jenkins relaxed, obviously pleased, and peered at the sheriff through bright black eyes.

"Was Otis Miller the only visitor Mr. Gardner had yesterday?" Cliff asked.

"Oh, my, no," Mrs. Jenkins said. "There was Nora Winston, his secretary. Then there was that nice Mr. Vandermeer. He's Mr. Gardner's nephew. And there was that Stevenson woman." She spoke the last name with a defiant thrust of her chin and wrinkled her nose in disapproval.

"Is that all?"

"Well," Mrs. Jenkins said, "those were the ones I recognized. There was a gentleman I never saw before. I'm sure he must be from out of town."

"Can you tell me when Mr. Gardner's visitors came and how long they stayed?"

"Well, now," Mrs. Jenkins said. "I'm not one to spy on my neighbors. I have better things to do with my time." She fumbled in her knitting bag, pulled out a notebook, and folded it open in her lap.

"Nora Winston came at ten-thirty. She stayed about a half hour or so."

Cliff jotted the time down on a pad.

"Then Mr. Vandermeer arrived. That was around twelve twenty-five."

"When did he leave?"

"About ten minutes past one."

"And Mrs. Stevenson?"

"She came along at four-twenty. She sashayed up to the door and went in without so much as a howdodo. Brazen as a strumpet with her fancy airs. You'd think she owned the place the way she carries on."

Cliff smiled as he tried to picture Betty Stevenson, a seventy-year-old widow, as a lady of the night. He waited for Mrs. Jenkins to continue, but the old lady sat staring out the window at Gardner's house, shaking her head.

"When did she leave?" he asked.

"Just a few minutes later," she said. "I really don't know why she bothered coming there at all. It was evident Mr. Gardner didn't want to see her."

"The other gentleman you saw," Cliff said. "When was he there?"

"Oh, he came along right after the Stevenson woman left. They passed each other on the walk. They talked for a few minutes, then he went inside and she drove off." She folded her arms across her chest, and looked at Cliff. "I suppose you want to know when he left?"

Cliff nodded.

She sniffed. "I don't know. As I say, I have better things to do than watch my neighbors." The old lady glared down her nose at Cliff with an indignant air and clamped her lips into a thin line.

Cliff gave her an apologetic smile. "Forgive me, Mrs. Jenkins," he said, hoping to steer her back to a more communicative mood. "You told Deputy Wimpole that you saw Otis enter the house. Did he ring the bell or knock?"

"Neither," she said. "The door was open a bit, I guess. He walked right in and stayed for about five minutes. Then he came out on the run, as if he was being chased by the devil himself."

"What time was this?"

"Five-thirty. But I already told your deputy that."

Cliff tugged at his ear. "It was getting dark about that time. Are you certain it was Otis Miller you saw?"

"Absolutely. I'd know his walk anywhere. With that bad leg and his limp. And those shabby clothes and that dirty cap." She clucked. "The poor man needs someone to look after him."

"Why didn't you call me when you saw Otis running away? Didn't you suspect something might be wrong?"

"My word, no," she said. "You know Otis. He's not all there and when he's been drinking he does the strangest things." She shook her head. "But to kill poor Mr. Gardner. I wouldn't dream he'd do such a thing."

Cliff slapped his hands on his knees and stood up: "Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins. If you think of anything else, please call me." With a tip of his cap, he stepped out into the pale November morning. The soothing murmur of the cool breeze stirring the redwoods belied the recent tragedy of Watson Corners.

Nora Winston opened the front door a crack and peered at Cliff. Smiling wanly, she slipped the chain from the door and threw it open.

Nora was an attractive woman, but her puffy eyes bore the marks of a sleepless night. She was wearing a bathrobe tied carelessly at the waist. "Please forgive my appearance, Cliff. This thing has really shaken me."

He squeezed her hand between both of his. "I'll be brief, Nora," he said. He and Nora had dated occasionally at one time, but though they had since gone their separate ways they remained good friends. Cliff felt a surge of tenderness and he put his hand gently on her shoulder as they walked to the couch.

Nora had been Jerry Gardner's secretary since he had retired from a lucrative position in San Francisco several years ago. He didn't require a full-time secretary, but his many activities kept her busy enough to earn a decent living.

"You saw Jerry yesterday morning, I understand," Cliff said.

Nora gave an exasperated sigh. "Thelma Jenkins. Lord, what a busy-body."

"Did you notice anything off about Jerry? Did he seem worried or upset?"

She shook her head and sat down, curling her legs under her and smoothing the robe over her knees. "He was quite cheerful," she said. "He was working on a deal in San Rafael that was going to bring him a considerable profit."

Cliff nodded. The Gardner family had settled in Marin County long before it was connected to San Francisco by the Golden Gate Bridge, when property there had sold for a dollar an acre. Jerry preferred the quiet life of Watson Corners to the somewhat hectic pace of the Bay Area but he had held onto the property in San Rafael. It didn't take a fortune teller to realize that the property would appreciate dramatically when the area became a popular bedroom community for San Francisco.

"Was he going to meet someone yesterday evening about the property?" he asked.

"Not that I'm aware of. He still wasn't sure if he wanted to sell the property. He had other plans in mind for it, but I don't know what they were exactly."

"Thelma told me that a stranger came to Jerry's house yesterday afternoon. Do you have any idea who?"

"No, but that's not unusual. I handled his business matters, not his personal life."

She was struggling to keep her composure. Her lower lip trembled and she bit it. Cliff looked away.

"When you called my office last night you said you were worried that something might have happened to Jerry. Why?"

"He was supposed to call me at five o'clock to let me know if he would need me today. He never forgets to phone. When he didn't call by five forty-five I called him and when he didn't answer I called you. He wasn't in the best of health, you know." She shuddered. "I had no idea anything like this—" Her voice broke and she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Cliff scribbled in his notebook. "You're sure of the time?"

Nora nodded. "I had a date at six and I wanted to know before I went out if I was going to have to work tomorrow." She eyed him quizzically. "Is it important?"

"I don't know," Cliff said. He put his hand on hers. "Try to get some rest, Nora. And let me know if I can do anything for you."

Putting her arms around him, Nora pressed her head to his chest and cried. "Oh, Cliff, who would do such a thing to Jerry? He was one of the kindest men I ever knew."

Cliff stroked her hair and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "We'll find out," he reassured her. He didn't tell her about Otis or the tape.

Driving back to his office, Cliff recalled the days when he was a policeman walking the beat in San Francisco. In those days he had developed an instinct that told him when trouble was lurking in the next alley. He was usually right, but he could never explain the feeling. It was like a cold knot at the base of his neck, urging him to be careful and look beyond the obvious. He had that feeling now, and he didn't like it.

Clem looked up from his desk and grinned. "Well, Chief, did old Miz Jenkins change her mind about seein' Otis?"

"She saw him all right."

Clem shook his head. "I don't understand it," he muttered. "It ain't possible for a man to be in two places at once." He shuffled to his feet and picked up a paper from his desk. "Sam Nichols sent this over," he said, handing the paper to Cliff. "It's the auto-opsy report on Mr. Gardner."

Cliff took the report without enthusiasm. Sam Nichols was the officious coroner of Watson Corners, almost as incompetent as Clem and clearly not suited to his line of work. Originally an M.D., he had failed miserably to cure the ills of living patients and so opted to practice on the deceased. Deciding to read the report later, if at all, Cliff tossed it on his desk and sent Clem out for hamburgers.



"Without pickles," he called after the deputy.  
"Gotcha, Chief."

As he ate his hamburger—after removing the pickles—and washed it down with coffee, Cliff sorted out the information he had gathered. Neither Nora nor Thelma had given him any reason to believe anything but the obvious—that Otis Miller had killed Gardner. But the scenario presented by the tape led to the inescapable conclusion that the murder was premeditated. And Otis was an impulsive man, Cliff knew, easily angered, but not one to hold a grudge. Cliff had thrown him in jail many times in the past, but the offenses were always minor: drunkenness in a public place, panhandling, vagrancy. He had never been accused of theft or assault. That wasn't his nature. Maybe Betty Stevenson and Kirby Vandermeer would be able to remove his lingering doubt.

He drove across town to a new housing tract, a small development of less than two dozen homes with the unlikely name of Majestic Oaks Estates. Why were developments always named after the areas they destroyed? Cliff eased the car to the curb in front of Mrs. Stevenson's house. The oak tree that stood before her small yard was anything but majestic. Clinging to life in the concrete and asphalt, it sent out straggly branches to a rain-laden sky.

Betty Stevenson was an elegant lady, still attractive in a regal way. Her silvery grey hair was neatly cut, accentuating her fine features. She smiled at Cliff and stepped aside to let him in. "How nice to see you, Sheriff."

"My pleasure," Cliff replied. "But the occasion isn't a happy one."

Mrs. Stevenson's eyes clouded and she fluttered a hand over her face. "Jerry," she said.

"You were at his place yesterday?" Cliff posed the question in such a way that it wasn't a question at all.

"Yes," she said, and the look on her face told Cliff she knew without asking where he got his information.

"How did he seem?"

"Quite well. But I didn't really have a chance to visit."

Cliff arched a brow.

"He was expecting someone—he told me to call him today and we'd have lunch together."

"The caller he was expecting—was that the gentleman you spoke with as you were leaving?"

"Yes," Mrs. Stevenson said.

"Did he introduce himself?"

"Yes. He said his name was Root—Harold or Howard, I'm not certain. He had just flown in from San Rafael and asked me if Mr. Gardner lived there."

Cliff noted the name in his notebook. "What can you tell me about Jerry's property in San Rafael?"

"Very little. We never discussed business."

"What was your relationship with Mr. Gardner?" Cliff asked, then quickly added, "You aren't obligated to answer that—at least not for the moment."

Betty Stevenson laughed. "I don't mind. We were very dear friends who attended school together years ago. Despite the small-town gossip, there was nothing more to our relationship than that."

"Did he keep a great deal of cash in the house?"

Mrs. Stevenson shook her head. "As I said, I knew very little about Jerry's financial habits. But I doubt if he had more than a few dollars on him at a time. Whenever we went anywhere he used credit cards."

"One more question, Mrs. Stevenson," Cliff said. "What time were you at Jerry's house?"

"It was around four-thirty," she said. She gave him a knowing smile. "But you know that already, don't you, Sheriff? I'm well aware of Thelma's precious diary."

Cliff smiled sheepishly and thanked her for her help.

He drove the two miles to the radio station just beyond the city limits. The small building was hidden by a grove of walnut trees, only the transmitting tower visible from the road. Kirby Vandermeer, part owner and general manager of Station KWCC, was expecting him.

Vandermeer was a big man with closely cropped grey hair and a neatly trimmed moustache. He wore an open-necked shirt with the cuffs turned up at the wrists. He glanced up and waved as Cliff entered the broadcasting booth.

Cliff waited while Vandermeer finished the commercial he was reading and flicked off the microphone. Turning in his chair, Vandermeer took a quick sip of coffee and leaned back. "I hear you arrested Otis Miller."

Cliff nodded. "News gets around fast in this town."

"News is my business," Vandermeer replied. "And your deputy likes

to hear his name on the air. But don't worry, I haven't announced it yet and I won't until you give me the word."

Cliff accepted Vandermeer's offer of coffee and sat down. "It doesn't matter. People will find out soon enough anyway."

Vandermeer made a face. "Newsmen are supposed to be objective, but when something like this happens to someone you love it's hard."

"I can understand your feelings," Cliff replied. "If it helps any, your uncle will be missed by everyone in this town."

Vandermeer acknowledged Cliff's remark with a rueful smile. "Uncle Jerry was good to me. If it wasn't for him I'd still be doing impersonations to winos in two-bit dives in Timbuctoo. But Unc loaned me the money to buy into this station."

Cliff started to say something, but Vandermeer held up his hand. "Just a minute, Cliff. I have to read another commercial. Then I'll put on an LP and we'll have time to talk." He flicked on the microphone and delivered a short spiel for a local used-car lot. Twisting a couple of dials and throwing a switch, he adjusted the volume and sat back as the turntable started to spin.

"O.K. Now I can give you my undivided attention."

"You visited Jerry yesterday," Cliff said. "Did he say anything to you about Otis?"

"Not a word. But Otis did odd jobs for him occasionally. Unc paid him well for what he did." Vandermeer shook his head sadly. "I didn't approve of it myself. I never liked Otis and thought Uncle Jerry was financing his drinking habit."

"What do you know about the property your uncle owned in San Rafael?" Cliff asked.

Vandermeer leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "Not much. He mentioned something to me about selling it. But he's been off and on about that for years." His eyes narrowed as he studied Cliff. "What does that have to do with his murder?"

"Probably nothing," Cliff said, "but I'm covering all the bases. I haven't come up with a compelling motive for Otis to kill Jerry. Robbery alone doesn't satisfy me."

Vandermeer snorted. "People are killed every day for less than that." He reached over and rifled through a stack of papers. Extracting one, he handed it to Cliff. "This came over the news wire this morning. A man

was beaten to death in Illinois. All the killer got for his trouble was thirty-eight cents."

"Yeah," Cliff agreed. "But I have evidence that this was a premeditated killing."

Vandermeer shrugged. "How much premeditation does it require to stick a knife in somebody? Otis has probably seen Unc flash money around and decided he wanted some of it."

Cliff let the matter drop. "Did you go to your uncle's house for a special reason?"

"It was just a social call. I was his only living relative and I liked to look in on him now and then."

"What time did you leave?"

Vandermeer stroked his moustache and thought a minute. "It was around one-fifteen, give or take a few minutes. I was due at the station at one-thirty. I had to fill in for Danny, my afternoon disc jockey, who was sick."

Cliff nodded. He had called Vandermeer at the station to tell him of his uncle's death.

Cliff asked him about Root, but Vandermeer could add nothing to Betty Stevenson's statement.

Vandermeer took another sip of coffee and tossed the styrofoam cup into the trash can. "If you'll pardon my saying so, Sheriff, it seems to me you're spending a lot of unnecessary time on this case. As far as I can see, you've got your man."

"Yeah," Cliff said. "But I'm a cautious man. I want to be certain of the facts before I charge him."

"Well, don't wait too long," Vandermeer replied. "When the word gets out about Otis you'll have a lynching on your hands."

The music stopped and Vandermeer reached for the microphone. Cliff silently mouthed a goodbye and slipped out of the booth. It was time, he decided, to see what he could shake out of Otis Miller's tree. The man had been too scared and confused to talk rationally. Cliff hoped that, given the morning to think about it, he would be ready to talk.

Otis hadn't touched his lunch. He sat on the edge of his bunk, staring at his feet through bloodshot eyes. Clem unlocked the door, and Cliff stepped into the cell and sat on the empty bunk. Before he had a chance to speak, Clem pulled a card from his pocket and started to read.

"You have the right to remain silent—"

Cliff stopped the deputy with an upraised hand. "I read him his rights when I arrested him, Clem."

"But that was this mornin'," Clem said.

"It still applies," Cliff told him, then turned to Otis. "Otis," he said, "I know you were at Mr. Gardner's house last night—I have a witness to prove it. Why did you go there?"

Otis swallowed hard. Taking a cigarette from his pocket, he struck a match, but his hands shook so badly he burned his fingers. Cliff held out his lighter.

Otis took a deep drag on the cigarette. "I didn't kill him, Sheriff. You gotta believe that."

"I'm listening," Cliff said.

"He was dead when I got there. He was layin' on the floor with a knife through him and his eyes was starin' up at me." Otis shuddered. "I need a drink."

Cliff motioned to Clem. "Bring Otis some coffee."

Otis grimaced and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Why did you go there?" Cliff continued

"Mr. Gardner called me and told me to get over there right away. He had a job for me and there was an extra ten in it if I could get there by five-thirty."

"What kind of job?"

"I dunno. He didn't say."

"What time did he call?"

Otis shrugged. "Didn't pay no attention. Five o'clock, maybe. Quarter after."

"Did you go right over?"

"Yeah. Sure. Ten bucks is ten bucks. I hightailed it over there as fast as I could."

"How did you get in the house?"

"The door was unlocked. Mr. Gardner told me over the phone to walk right in, he'd be in his study."

"Tell me exactly what you saw when you went into Mr. Gardner's study," Cliff said.

"I didn't see nothin' but them eyes starin' up at me. It scared the holy rhubarb out of me." Otis ran the tip of his tongue across his upper lip. "Please, Sheriff. Just a little drink?"

Cliff shook his head. "Why didn't you report it to the police?"

"I was scared, Sheriff. I figured people would think I killed Mr. Gardner. I'm a bum, I know that. Nobody'd believe me."

Cliff silently agreed. And if Otis were telling the truth, he had certainly incriminated himself by running. Cliff motioned to Clem to unlock the door. "Book him for leaving the scene of a crime," he said. It would keep Otis safe behind bars until Cliff decided what he wanted to do. The cold spot at the base of his neck was growing stronger.

Back at his desk, he picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello?" Nora Winston's voice sounded tired.

"Nora, this is Cliff. I need your help."

"What is it?"

"Do you have any idea how much Jerry was asking for the San Rafael property?"

"I'm not sure of the exact price, but it was in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars an acre."

"How many acres?"

"A hundred."

Cliff gave a low whistle. "That's a cool million. Who was he dealing with?"

"The San Rafael Development Corporation. I have the address on the tape Jerry gave me yesterday. Can you wait a minute?"

"Better yet," Cliff said, "let me borrow the tape and I'll get the information for myself."

He hung up and grabbed his coat. Stopping briefly at Nora's apartment, he picked up the tape, then headed for the tiny airport a few miles away.

Cliff was thankful he had his pilot's license. The trip to San Francisco from Watson Corners was otherwise not the easiest one to make. He radioed the control tower at San Francisco International two hours after taking off. It took another thirty minutes to drive the fifteen miles to downtown San Francisco where Cliff had set up a meeting with an ex-colleague who worked for the San Francisco Police Department.

It was late afternoon by the time he connected with Kevin Bell, the man he had flown down to see. Handing Bell a small package, Cliff explained what he wanted done.

"No problem," Bell said. "I'll call you first thing in the morning."

Cliff joined the evening rush-hour traffic, heading back down Van Ness

Avenue toward the airport. Spotting a pay phone, he pulled over and fished some coins from his pocket. He hoped Root wasn't a nine-to-five man and was relieved when Root himself answered the phone. Cliff identified himself and told him about Jerry's death.

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Sheriff," Root said. "Do you know who killed him?"

"We have a suspect in custody."

"Then how can I help you?"

"You visited Mr. Gardner yesterday afternoon," Cliff said. "Other than the killer, you were probably the last person to see him alive. I know you were buying some property from him, and I'm trying to learn if it might have some bearing on the case."

"The deal fell through," Root said.

"Oh?" Cliff had half expected that.

"Mr. Gardner called me yesterday and told me he had decided to donate the property to the Young World Christian Center for use as a home for wayward children. He'd been supporting the group for some time and felt it was something he had to do."

"You must have been disappointed," Cliff said.

"Very," Root replied. "We offered him a substantial amount for the property."

"Is that why you went to see him?"

"I thought a personal visit might change his mind," Root said. "But it was a waste of time."

"What time did Mr. Gardner call you yesterday?"

There was a pause and Cliff heard a rustle of papers. "I logged the call in at one-thirty."

"Do you have any idea when he made the decision to give the property away?"

"It came as a shock to me. I knew he was hesitant about selling the property, but our negotiations had been going quite smoothly. He must have made up his mind shortly before he called me."

"How long were you at Gardner's house yesterday?" Cliff asked.

"I left about five o'clock," Root said.

"Do you know if he was expecting anyone else that evening?"

"I couldn't say. Our conversation was limited to the property, and it was a bit strained."

"Did you argue with him?"

"It wasn't an argument exactly," Root said. "I implied that we might take legal action. But I was whistling in the dark and he knew it."

Cliff came home to an empty house with dirty dishes piled in the sink. He poured himself a glass of milk and drank it down. Adding the empty glass to the growing heap, he kicked off his shoes and went into the bedroom. It was late and he hadn't eaten since noon, but he was too tired to care. Being single wasn't all it was cracked up to be. He wondered if Nora ever thought the same thing.

Clem was already at his desk the following morning when Cliff arrived an hour earlier than usual. The deputy was nothing if not dedicated, Cliff had to give him credit for that. And he made good coffee. Cliff poured a cup and sat down, savoring the first swallow.

He had spent a sleepless night trying to fit the pieces of the murder together. The conclusion he'd reached, satisfactory though it seemed, depended on the answer he received from Kevin Bell.

He flinched when the phone rang, scooped up the receiver, and cradled it to his ear. "Sheriff Eldridge."

"Cliff?" The voice on the other end of the line was edged with excitement. "You were right—"

Cliff tensed in his chair, listening with growing interest as Bell talked.

"You're sure about this, Kevin? I have to be able to prove it."

"No doubt about it," Bell said.

Cliff wrote down the information, thanked Bell, and hung up. Wide awake now, he stood up. "Come along, Clem," he said. "I need you to help me bring in a murderer."

A sleepy Kirby Vandermeer answered the door with disheveled hair and a stubble of beard on his usually clean-shaven face. "Do you know what time it is?" His sleepy eyes registered annoyance.

"It's later than you think," Cliff said.

Vandermeer stepped aside, still angered by the early intrusion. "Can't this wait? I was out very late last night."

"It's about your uncle's murder," Cliff said.

"What about it?"

"I have some new evidence that convinces me Otis Miller didn't do it."

Vandermeer ran a hand through his hair and sat down. "Let's hear it."



"Were you aware that your uncle was donating his San Rafael property to a church?" Cliff said.

Vandermeer sat up and his mouth fell open. It was a good act, but Cliff was willing to bet the information wasn't news to Vandermeer.

"I—I—" Vandermeer started. "He never said a word to me about it."

"I think he did," Cliff said.

"What are you implying?"

"As his only relative you stood to inherit a great deal of money if the sale went through. When you visited Jerry the other day he told you about his decision to give the property away. You must have been very upset."

Vandermeer glared at Cliff. "It was his property. What he did with it was no concern of mine."

"When you left your uncle's house you went directly to the radio station," Cliff continued.

Vandermeer smiled. "That's right, Sheriff. I was working at the station all afternoon and evening—I have several hundred listeners to prove it."

"Yeah," Cliff said. "It's a good alibi, all right. And it had me fooled for a while. But when I came to see you at the station yesterday you put on an LP so we could be free to talk. Some take anywhere from fifteen minutes to a half hour to run and leave you plenty of time to slip away from the station and return with no one being the wiser. Which you did that afternoon, driving back to Jerry's house and going in the back way to avoid Thelma Jenkins' prying eyes."

Cliff watched the hope in Vandermeer's eyes flicker. "What about Otis? He was there when Unc was killed."

"He was there, all right," Cliff agreed. "But Jerry was dead by then. You told me yourself you used to be an impersonator. You called Otis after you killed your uncle, impersonating Jerry's voice—as you had on the tape we found on the desk—and asked him to come over to the house. You knew he would, especially when you sweetened the pot with a ten-dollar bonus. You knew, too, that Thelma would be watching."

Vandermeer was on his feet. "You've been watching too much TV, Sheriff Eldridge. These allegations are all conjecture."

"I haven't finished," Cliff said. "Something bothered me about the tape recording on Jerry's desk."

"What was wrong with it?"

"There was nothing wrong with it. The voice and sounds were convincing enough. It's what I *didn't* hear that made me realize it was a fake.

"Nora Winston told me she called Jerry at five forty-five. He didn't answer, of course, because he was dead. But from Mrs. Jenkins' statement, Otis was there at five-thirty. If he had killed Jerry, as the tape indicates, the time factor becomes important."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Vandermeer said.

"I played the tape and timed it. It took twenty-seven minutes from the time of the alleged murder until the tape ran out. There was nothing on the tape after the sound of the door closing, when Otis supposedly ran from the house. And yet the telephone was sitting right next to the tape recorder."

"The machine could have malfunctioned," Vandermeer said. "Or Thelma could be mistaken about the time."

"She wasn't mistaken. She clocked everybody's visits that day. And everyone, including yourself, verified them."

"Maybe Nora didn't call when she thought she did," Vandermeer said. "Or maybe she didn't call at all. Hell, *she* could have killed Unc, for all I know." He looked at Cliff. "I know you were sweet on her once, Sheriff, but don't let your personal life color your judgment."

"I took a trip to San Francisco yesterday and called on a colleague of mine," Cliff said. "I borrowed a tape from Nora that your uncle had made the other day. And I took the murder tape too. My friend is an expert in the field. He told me that, without a doubt, the two tapes were recorded on different machines."

"You still have no proof that I killed Uncle Jerry."

"If we have to," Cliff said, "we can identify the second voice using voiceprints. They're like fingerprints, you know. No matter how hard you try to disguise your voice, the basic pattern is still there. But I don't think that will be necessary. You admitted your guilt a few minutes ago."

Vandermeer looked at him sharply. "What are you talking about?"

Cliff smiled. "When I mentioned the murder tape you didn't bat an eye. You knew all about it, although I told no one, not even Clem, it existed. I'm arresting you for the murder of Jerry Gardner."

He turned to Clem. "You can read him his rights."

Clem's eyes lit up and he pulled the card from his pocket. "You have the right to remain silent—" he began.

*It was sinister how everyone conspired to keep her from her work . . .*

# JUST DESERTS

by

# FAY GRISSOM



The letter could not have arrived at a more auspicious time. After the morning Eleanor had just put in, even the small diversion provided by the Vermont postmark and the unfamiliar name and address on the envelope were wildly welcome.

Anything, she thought as she took the elevator back upstairs with the mail, to distract her from the series of petty difficulties and disruptions that had dogged her since dawn. It was sinister how everything and

everyone had conspired to keep her from her work—from getting down to the problem that had developed with the ninth chapter of her new book.

She'd begun this unpromising day, Eleanor remembered sourly, by discovering red spiders in the small orange plant she'd so proudly raised from a seed. Then, while spraying it, she'd also sprayed five pristine pages that she'd just neatly retyped the night before. Next, and somehow worst of all, when she'd gone into the kitchen she'd found that she was out of coffee.

Not a cosmic event in itself, Eleanor tried to convince herself, but even so it had helped to spoil the orderly beginning of her day, reminding her afresh how difficult it was to manage without a maid and how equally difficult it was to find a domestic who could pass the most rudimentary security check. Further, it had delivered her up to one of Dolly's witless monologues when Eleanor had gone downstairs to borrow enough coffee to make do until her order came from the grocer.

At the best of times, Eleanor had mixed feelings about Dolly. Today, with Dolly dithering away about her latest robbery, Eleanor found herself growing increasingly irritated. After all, this was Dolly's second, and Eleanor quite frankly felt that she'd invited them both. Imagine, she thought indignantly, having an apartment full of Impressionist paintings and only ordinary locks on the doors! And imagine hiring domestics without even requiring a polygraph! Without even checking their references, Eleanor thought, scandalized, as Dolly admitted now that she'd hired her new cook on the spot because she'd liked the way the way he looked!

—Well, we all get what we deserve, Eleanor had reflected. She had almost said it aloud. It was only by cutting Dolly's story short, reminding her of the coffee she'd come to borrow, that she'd managed to get away and back up to her own apartment without saying something to that effect to Dolly's face.

In her own kitchen, Eleanor had discovered next that the borrowed coffee was the wrong roast and the wrong grind. Her day was still hopelessly snarled. As if to prove it, she'd scarcely finished her first cup of watery coffee, which she had to boil in a saucepan on top of the stove, when the wretched phone calls began—calls from friends she'd trained not to ring up during her morning work time. A series of calls from her mother, who'd just read about the latest robbery in Eleanor's building

in the morning paper and was determined that she come back out to Locust Valley until "all this is over."

"But, Mother, I *can't*! It's not as if I'm in any danger," Eleanor told her for the third time. "After all, I haven't been robbed, and, furthermore, I don't intend to be."

"But how can you *say* that, dear?" her mother protested. "I mean, the robber is so clever! Imagine posing as that woman's cook and actually preparing her meals for a week! Think of the times he pretended to be the decorator from Bloomingdale's—and the exterminator—and the carpet-cleaning man! It's downright *diabolical* how he knows who has a lot of valuables, and how to get them to let him in. He must be terribly clever to get into the building at all—past the doormen, I mean."

"Oh, Mother, a not-too-bright three-year-old could get past Hank or Mike," Eleanor told her, an edge of exasperation in her voice now. "And all you'd have to do to find out anything about anyone in this building is to buy Mike a couple of drinks! That's one of the reasons I feel so safe. Hank wouldn't know a first edition from a comic book or one of my valuable stamps from the everyday variety, so he's unlikely to finger me as a good robbery prospect. Also, I have four locks, which I have changed regularly, I *keep* them locked, and I never let anyone in that I don't know."

Eleanor's mother didn't sound altogether convinced, but at last she brought the conversation to an end. But Eleanor had no sooner replaced the receiver than the phone rang again—and again—and again. The calls were from one of her neighbors, from a police detective, and from her insurance agent, all asking about the robbery. And finally there was an abusive call from the dimwit locksmith.

The man he'd sent to change the locks the day before had arrived without identification and Eleanor had refused to let him in. The owner had just learned of it and was in a rage. In the course of the conversation he called her a hysterical old maid. She hung up furiously. Now she would have to find another locksmith and negotiate the price all over again.

Although the locksmith's gratuitous taunt had been of a piece with the rest of the whole wretched morning, it had somehow seemed the final straw to Eleanor. That was when she gave up trying to write and decided to go downstairs for the mail.

The postman, as usual, had jammed her mail into the box. When she'd finally maneuvered it free and sorted through it, she saw there was nothing

interesting besides the usual dreary publications and junk mail except for the letter from Vermont.

She read it in the elevator going back upstairs—slowly, carefully, savoring the unexpected message.

“Dear Ms. English,” it said. “Forgive my presumption in writing to you, but I feel I must tell you how very much your book, *Just Deserts*, has meant to me. I teach Creative Writing in a small women’s college near here, and I like to think I have given much of my life to the study of great literature. Even so, I do not believe I have ever encountered a work of genius to match *Just Deserts*. Your characters are so striking that they are more vivid to me than people I have known long and intimately. And the destinies you have worked out for them have the inexorability of Greek drama. And each of these characters does indeed receive his ‘just deserts.’ Because I find this book so remarkable, I plan to use it as a text in my course. And because I consider you the greatest living American author I have searched out first editions of all your works and want to ask you to do me the great favor of signing them for me. I plan to be in New York in the near future and will bring them with me on the chance that you will be gracious enough to autograph them.

Sincerely,  
Milton Lovering.”

Eleanor was quite literally stunned. This was her first real fan letter. Even after the elevator door opened on her floor, she stood rooted in the center of the car. She was flushed, flustered, almost dizzy with delight. This was the sort of intelligent, discerning praise she’d always dreamed about—the kind of praise that was constantly being heaped on other, lesser writers, but never on her.

A work of genius—the greatest living American author—Eleanor almost floated out of the elevator and back inside her apartment.

There, she immediately went to her typewriter, where she read the letter through once again. Suddenly she felt could do anything. Chapter nine would be no problem.

But before she had the chance to begin to work there was the sharp buzz of the doorbell. She went down the hallway to the door and peered through the peephole.

The tall, pleasant-looking man, standing well back from the door so that she could examine him, was fortyish, bearded, conservatively dressed in a tweed jacket, contrasting green-and-black-plaid vest, and grey flannel.

slacks. He must have sensed that Eleanor was studying him through the peephole, for he suddenly smiled and held up four books he had been carrying under his arm. "My name is Lovering," he said. "Did you receive my letter?"

She recognized them, of course—her books. And she recognized a distinguished man of letters when she saw one.

Eleanor's hands flew to her hair, smoothed at her dress. "Just a moment!" she called as she fumbled at the chain lock, slid back the bolt, turned the latch, and opened the police lock.

"Come in, come in, Mr. Lovering," she welcomed him warmly, flinging wide the door, and the robber stepped inside.

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**TO: ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE  
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D1HE0-1

*It was a pretty easy stunt as gags go . . .*



**S**ome films are easy to work, others are dangerous and demanding. Then there are those that make you ask yourself, how do I get out of this turkey? *Bandits of the Border* was worse than that. It was a disaster from the first day on the set.

I've been a stunt man since the early Sixties, and to me and my creditors a buck is a buck. I've never turned down any gags except for a few that were so unsafe and unpredictable that not even the great Bill James would



have tried them. This picture was just a routine western-adventure flick with the usual gags—horse falls, saddle falls, fistfights—nothing out of the ordinary. But the scale was still union, so I took the contract.

Wonder Studios had never produced anything worthy of much artistic notice. In fact, there's an old joke around Hollywood that goes "If it's a good picture, it's a real Wonder!" This one was done in their normal quickie style, with the fading screen legend, Buck Baker, as the star. In the old days, Buck had been the number-one box office draw with the sagebrush and six-gun fans. Now, as the saying goes, he couldn't get arrested in Hollywood. *Bandits of the Border* was his last gasp as a film hero.

I'd worked with some of the best in the business and had seen the ego problems, professional jealousies, and personal dislikes of all of them. Buck was the complete opposite of most of today's stars, quiet and mannerly, an old pro at the movie game. He was on the set the first morning I arrived and he impressed me with his firm handshake and his air of bored indifference to his status as the star of the film.

We were introduced by the assistant director, a stylish young eager-beaver type, Jay Miller. I told Buck how pleased I was to work with him and how much I'd enjoyed his earlier pictures.

"Thanks," he said in that soft rich baritone. "I've always tried to give my fans what they wanted to see." He appraised me for a long moment and added, "I've heard good things about you too. They say you're one of the best riders in the business."

"I like horses," I said.

"Good. I used to do all my own stuff, but—" he patted his slight paunch with his sun-browned hand "—the years seem to be catching up with me."

I smiled. "You look in pretty good shape to me." I meant it. He did look good for a man his age. He was as slim and trim as his publicity photos made him appear—a few pounds heavier, perhaps, but still solid.

"Yeah, well. Just make me look good and we'll get along," he said.

I returned his easy grin and watched as he strode back to his chair in the shade of his assigned trailer. Then turning to the A.D. I said, "Anything I should know about working with Mr. Baker?"

Jay smiled and shrugged. "Just stay with his style in the action scenes and don't let him see you mistreat his horse."

"No problem there," I told him. "I really do like horses."

"Fine." He shrugged again. "C'mon, I'll show you the trailer we rented for you. Get your gear put away and then come on over to that silver trailer. The big shots are all over there drinking coffee and going over the storyboard."

As soon as I had my pads stored and my suitcases in the bedroom, I lit a cigarette and walked over to meet the producer and director. The May sun was starting to heat things up. It really felt good on my back. Lifting the latch, I opened the door and stepped inside the air-conditioned office trailer.

The four men who sat around the table looked up at my entrance with a hint of annoyance. Then the big fat man in the terrycloth jumpsuit stood up and held out his hand. "Welcome aboard, Steve." He motioned toward the others. "This is Steve Holt, our stunt coordinator. Fred Akers, your director, and Craig Gates, our co-star."

I shook hands with each of them in turn. The director was a thin nervous man with an air of authority. I didn't know him but I knew *of* him, and his work was above average—a surprise, considering the studio producing this picture.

Craig Gates I knew. He was another surprise, one of the fastest-rising young stars in the film world, a heartthrob in the truest sense of the word. He was also a first-class pain in the neck. Some of my friends had worked on a few of his films, and considered him an arrogant, coke-sniffing ego-maniac. He looked the part. I got a sinking feeling in my gut.

The fourth man had not been included in the introductions, so I nodded to him. He smiled, showing a mouthful of teeth that reminded me of Bruce, the mechanical shark. "H. R. Boghan," he said coldly. "I'm Mr. Gates' manager." He made no move to accept the hand I offered so I stuck the hand into my hip pocket and leaned against the wall. My old friend Gordon Victor, the producer, sat down and in his jovial tone told me to get a cup of coffee and find a chair. After I did both he said; "Here's a copy of the script, Steve. Nothing you can't handle."

While they went back to their discussion I sipped my coffee and scanned the rivet-bound pages. It was simple stuff, just like I'd figured. Lots of hard riding and brawling, a couple of thirty-foot falls. A regular Buck Baker special. I finished and sat back in polite silence.

The conversation had been heating up and I listened to the anger with misgivings. Now, don't misunderstand me—all pictures have problems of one kind or another. There are always arguments about the script or

costuming or something, but this was different—there was a personal viciousness in some of Craig Gates' remarks.

"I don't give a damn," America's newest male sex symbol was shouting, his plastic-handsome features twisted with rage, "I'm not playing second fiddle to some old washed-up cowboy!"

"Now, calm down, Craig," Vic replied, his voice low, the effort to remain calm himself an obvious strain. "I can't rewrite the whole script. Buck's already agreed to share the billing with you on an equal basis and the contracts are all signed. The studio expects you to live up to your commitment." He fixed the agent with a hard stare. "Boghan understood the terms, so if there's a problem it's between you and him. Filming begins in the morning and you'll be on the set, ready to work, or we'll have to—"

"Don't threaten me!" Gates said imperiously.

"No one's threatening anybody. I'm just reminding you we have a legal contract," the producer replied levelly, "the terms of which are enforceable in any court."

At this turn of events, Boghan showed his first sign of emotion. He coughed and laid a restraining hand on his young client's shoulder. "I'm sure this can be worked out to everyone's satisfaction. But first I think, Craig, you and I should talk things over in private." He stood and began to urge Gates toward the door. "There will be no problems, Mr. Victor. We'll honor our end of the contract. Completely."

The door closed behind them and Vic sighed heavily. Akers, the director, broke his pencil in half and threw the pieces against the wall. I buried my nose in my coffee and said nothing. I was sure Craig Gates would honor the contract, but there would be problems. I could smell them coming.

I went over the script again then, avoiding anything that was none of a stunt man's business. Vic and Akers approved my suggestions, gave me a rundown of tomorrow's schedule, and went into a worried huddle as I let myself out into the sunny brightness of the Arizona morning.

When my stunt men arrived later in the day, I went over the action with them, treated them to dinner at a steakhouse down the highway, and then drove back to the location to turn in early. Most of the trailers were dark and silent, but a single light showed in Buck Baker's window. He had always prided himself on knowing his lines, and it was clear that he did it by studying them while others were in town partying. He was

the last of his kind, a holdover from the days when a star owed his fans the best he could give them.

The day started out smoothly enough. The first shot was set up within an hour. Most of the horses were a bit frisky, giving my boys a chance to show off their skill as they took the edge off them. I got Buck's big snow-white stallion out of the pen and saddled him myself.

Just as I was prepared to mount up, Baker took the reins from me and climbed aboard, giving me a smile. "Thanks, Steve," he said, "but I'm not that old." With a firm seat and an easy grace, he put the stud through his paces. I watched with genuine admiration. Buck was nearing sixty, but no one could have told it the way he handled that animal. It was easy to see why he'd been called The Greatest Cowboy in the World.

Most of the shots being dialogue, there wasn't much for my crew to do that morning. After lunch we mounted up for a stagecoach chase and Buck was visibly pleased with the way I doubled him in the transfer leap from his horse to the top of the wildly careening coach. I was taking a breather when he approached.

"Steve," he said, "that was really something. I could see myself twenty years ago, watching you do that."

"Hell, Buck," I answered modestly, "you invented the gag. I just copied your style from *Ranger Legion*."

He smiled a bit sadly. "Yeah—back in 1943." His big shoulders seemed to droop just a little as he walked away.

Since everyone knew that Craig Gates resented having to share star credit with Buck, their first scene together was witnessed with great interest by the entire cast and crew. It was plain to see that tension existed, but the scene came off well and Akers was impressed by the performances. He asked for a retake for safety's sake and Gates complied without a fuss. Baker gave his usual professional attention to the direction and was very good.

I had about decided that things were going along as smoothly as on any other shoot when it happened.

It was the last setup of the day and I was getting out of the costume that was a copy of the one Buck would be wearing all through the film when there was a sudden commotion from the direction of the set.

Betty, the makeup girl, was holding her face and crying. Craig Gates

was yelling at her and threatening to slap her again. I started toward them and put myself in the middle of the argument. "Take it easy, Mr. Gates," I warned.

"This is none of your concern!" he snapped.

"See you later, Betty," I told her.

The blow came in fast. My reflexes saved me from the full force of it, but I still went down hard. I felt the hot blood rising in my face and I got up fast, my fists clenched and ready.

"Don't do it, Steve."

The calm, quiet voice broke my rage, and I took a deep breath to relax. "I'm cool—thanks, Mr. Akers," I said, giving the actor a grim look. The director's intervention had helped save my career and Craig Gates' million-dollar face—this time.

The rest of the week, I kept out of Gates' way, only speaking to him when I had to. He continued to ride Betty about every little thing. His pancake was either too heavy or too light, his eyes weren't lined dark enough—he went on and on until she became a quivering wreck. Take it from me, that set became the most unpleasant location I or anyone else had ever been contracted on. Buck Baker was too professional to say so, but you could see that he was becoming more and more disgusted with his arrogant co-star.

As we moved into the second week of shooting, most of the heavy stuntwork began. We were really earning our money now and there was little time for anything else. I had almost forgotten about Gates.

The shot called for Gates' character to gallop up to the edge of a fifty-foot cliff and then leap his mount off into the river below. I was doubling Buck, so Chet Jackson put on the costume for Gates' stunt gag. Gates was trying to tell Chet how to do his job and was being ignored for the most part.

Before I could prevent it, Buck's stallion, Snowking, reached out and nudged Gates with his nose. Either the push was harder than it looked or Gates was off balance because the blond actor went down on his face in the biggest pile of manure I'd ever seen.

Sputtering with fury, Gates leaped up amidst the gales of laughter and, cursing savagely, kicked the big white stallion in the belly. The startled horse squealed with pain and began to buck wildly. I held onto the reins desperately and tried to get him under control. When I finally managed to stop him a shout of warning caused me to turn.

Gates had picked up a section of dolly track and was walking toward the snorting horse with murder in his eyes. But before he reached him Buck Baker pulled back a gloved hand, spun Gates around, and in classic cowboy style smashed a right cross into the younger man's face. Dropping the piece of track, Gates cursed and threw a punch of his own. Buck ducked under it and with a one-two combination laid the other man out cold on the ground. Looking around somewhat self-consciously, Buck straightened his Stetson and said softly, "No son of a bitch hits my horse." He took the reins from me and walked off with the animal, looking a little younger somehow.

The next two days were happy ones. Craig Gates refused to leave his trailer. His manager raised a stink, but Buck was still too big a star to tangle with—he just listened in silence, then told Boghan to go soak his head.

When his bruises were sufficiently healed to allow him to show his face in public once more, Gates returned to work, very quiet and subdued. Maybe he had learned something, I thought. The first scene the two stars played together went very smoothly.

As the filming approached the final days, the only sign that there was still a problem was in Gates' attempts to upstage the older actor. Baker fended them off with the ease of many years of practice and experience and often made the other man look foolish without appearing to do so.

Then one night I awoke suddenly from a sound sleep, not quite sure what had disturbed me. I lay still for a second, then got up and walked to the door of my trailer in my underwear. The night breeze was cool as I stepped outside. There was a moan from the direction of the horse pens. I went over and peered into the corral.

In the middle of the area, the big white body of Snowking lay on its side, the animal's head stretched out, the nostrils wide and flaring in agony. I ran back to the trailer, pulled on a pair of pants, and raced to the office trailer to call into town for a vet.

In the chilly pre-dawn greyness I stood with the others, watching silently as the great horse gave up and died. Dr. Gonzales stood up and shook his head.

"I did my best," he said. "I'm sorry."

A loud sob broke the stillness and I nearly cried myself as Buck Baker

began to weep, openly and without shame. Those two went back quite a few years together, and Snowking had been a fine horse. I knew how a man could form an attachment to an animal like that, but for Buck it was more than that—it was the death of the last link to his years of glory.

Vic went to Buck, slipped an arm around his shoulders and said, "I'm really sorry, Buck. He was up in years though—it was bound to happen someday."

Buck nodded. "I know. I'm just a sentimental old fool, crying over a horse—"

Dr. Gonzales, who was packing his instruments, said, "That horse died from foundering. It's my guess he got into enough sweetfeed to kill him."

We all looked up quickly. Buck's face turned hard and cold. All eyes swiveled to the wrangler, Tex Jenkins. The young cowboy looked around with a shocked expression and held up his hands. "Wait a minute!" he said. "Don't blame me! I fed all these animals their normal amount and then put the sack back in the storage bin."

"You're sure?" Vic asked.

"Yes, sir. I wouldn't forget something like that!"

Without a word, Buck turned and walked toward the bin, all of us trailing behind in silence. Opening the door, he reached inside and pulled out an empty grain sack. "One hundred pounds of grain," he said in a deadly tone of voice. "The punk might as well have fed him arsenic."

We all knew who he was talking about. In a group, we followed him to Gates' trailer. Whatever happened next was going to be richly deserved and not one of us would dream of lifting a finger to prevent it. We watched as Buck banged on the door until it was opened.

Gates stood blinking at the surrounding circle of serious faces.

"Why?" Buck asked him.

"What?"

"Why didn't you just shoot him?"

"Baker, have you gone nuts? What the hell are you raving about?"

His face scarlet, Buck grabbed Gates around the neck and began to shake him violently. "My horse, damn you! You fed my horse enough grain to kill an elephant!"

Prying himself loose, Gates staggered back and drew in a ragged breath. "What are you talking about? I just gave him a good feed!" He looked around at the rest of us in panic. "I was sorry about kicking him that day. I just wanted to make up with him."

"You dirty—" Buck lunged at the young actor. They struggled for a minute, then the older man choked, gasped, clutched his chest, and fell heavily to the ground.

A stroke, the attendants told Vic as they loaded Buck into the ambulance. The red lights flashed across our faces as we surrounded the vehicle. The doors slammed and we parted to let it race for the hospital, siren wailing. Buck Baker would probably live, the medics had said, but how much damage the stroke had done they couldn't be certain.

Craig Gates stood weakly against the wall of his trailer, his pale face turned to us.

"For the love of God, fellas," he stammered, "I never meant for anything like this to happen, I swear it!"

Gordon Victor walked up and snapped his pudgy fingers. "Gates, you are the lowest form of life I've ever laid eyes on! You're through in the movie business, I promise you that!" Turning on his heel, he stalked off, and one by one the rest broke apart and drifted away, leaving me staring at the crestfallen actor as the pinkness of the rising sun washed across the landscape.

"Steve!" Gates looked at me with shocked awareness. "You've got to believe me! I didn't mean it—I just wanted to—"

"Don't say it, Gates. I don't want to hear about how you wanted to make friends with Snowking."

"All right!" he shouted. "So I didn't! I admit it—I wanted to make the damned horse sick. I figured to give him such a bellyache he'd get sick. But it was just a gag, a prank that backfired, that's all—just a gag!"

"Nobody's laughing," I told him, then turned my back and went to get some coffee.

In Hollywood, business is business and the dollar is almighty. Vic called a production meeting that morning and told us that since there were only two scenes left to film the picture would be finished with me doubling for the stricken star. It was action stuff, so there would be no problem with dialogue or facial shots.

I dressed in Buck's costume and took my place on the balcony of the saloon set. A few minutes later a pale and remorseful Gates appeared. He mounted the stairs and joined me. I gave him a flat stare but kept my mouth shut.



When the cameras were set and the lighting was correct, Akers gave us the signal. I asked Gates in a neutral tone if he understood the gag. We were to struggle at the railing, trade a couple of punches, then go over the breakaway railing and fall onto the prop table below. He nodded and I cued Akers we were ready.

It was a pretty easy stunt as gags go—just a fall of fifteen feet onto a table that was rigged to fold at the correct angle to allow us to break our fall and roll off onto the floor. Gates could've asked for a stunt man, but he was too ashamed, I guess. Anyway, I would be on the bottom, so most of the impact would be on me.

Everything went like clockwork. The fight was as hard and realistic-looking as we could make it. The railing gave way just at the right time, and down we went. But stunt work is mostly a matter of timing and split-second coordination. Sure, training and experience are big factors too, but when the gag is going down you have to be on time, or accidents can occur. You'd be surprised how easy it is to be permanently crippled or even killed if your timing is thrown off enough to drop you on your neck from fifteen feet in the air.

No, sir, a stunt gag isn't funny if it goes wrong. A man can get killed, even a big star. I began to shift my weight just enough, seeing the look of horror on Gates' face with a certain amount of justified pride at the speed of my trained reflexes.

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*Jail was part of the flow . . .*

# THE FLOW

by  
ROBERT  
TWOHY



I called the man Jack, though I'd rather have called him Dad. But he said he wasn't my dad and that I should call him Jack. Which made me feel funny and not like the other kids. But I'm not laying anything on him, it wasn't his fault he wasn't my dad, and if he hadn't been living with us it would have been just Mother and me, which would have made me feel even more different maybe.

He wasn't a bad guy. I liked him better than any of the others that

lived with us later. He stayed with us the longest. Then he was gone, and another guy lived with us. We had a big dark apartment. Then *he* left and it was another guy.

In school I didn't know what was going on. Miss Simpson would tell us to do things and I didn't know what she wanted.

"Everybody stand in a circle!" The others knew what she meant and I'd get nervous and sort of run around like the others were doing, but they knew what they were doing and I didn't. Then everybody would be looking at me and laughing and I'd see them all holding hands and I was still running around by myself.

Miss Simpson had me stay after. "You seem normal and your hearing checks out all right but you don't seem to fit in. Do you feel all right?"

"Sure." I didn't know what she meant. I felt like I felt, however that was.

"How are things at home?"

"Fine." Things were like they'd always been, Mother and whoever was living with us drinking a lot. The men changed but they were pretty much alike. Jack was the best but not that much different.

"You don't have brothers or sisters, do you?"

"No."

"Do you like school?"

"Sure."

"Do you like the other children?"

"Sure." But they scared me. All of them, boys and girls. Girls particularly. They were different and laughed more and jumped around more than the boys, who jumped around enough. They had different eyes and sharper voices. The boys would push me when Miss Simpson wasn't looking, but the girls, the way they looked and laughed and whispered to each other, scared me more. They were different and scarier and I didn't want anything to do with them.

Miss Simpson said in a low voice, "Lonely little liar." She looked at me and said, "I feel for you."

I didn't know what she meant.

I got older, and different men came and lived with us a while, then went. Then there weren't any men, it was just Mother and me. I thought that might be better but it wasn't. Her face had got all puffy and her hair was stringy like she should wash it. She'd gotten fat and she waddled

around. No one came over. She had a job at a bakery, and at night looked at the TV and drank.

I was a junior in high school. I didn't go out for any sports and didn't have any talent, like for band, and didn't get in any clubs or anything. I didn't read too well and in most classes I didn't know what you were supposed to do, but generally I got C's. It wasn't like those high schools in movies, with switchblades and riots and everybody on dope and slugging the teachers. Or if it was I never saw any of that.

I didn't have any close friends—or *any* friends, in fact. I never really talked to anyone. I kept going to school because I didn't know what else to do.

Then Mother wasn't working any more and sat all the time in her bedroom and came out usually just to go for liquor—she'd put a coat on over her nightgown and go down the street where there was a liquor store and come back and let the coat fall on the floor. She'd go in the kitchen with the bottle and there were lots of empties in the kitchen and she'd pour the liquor into an empty, using a funnel, and never spilling a drop, until both bottles were half full. Then she'd fill them the rest of the way with water and get a glass and carry it with both bottles into the bedroom and close the door.

She never talked to me. I don't know if she knew who I was. Her eyes were like dirty shells with a smudge of blue in them. But the refrigerator was usually full—frozen dinners and loaves of bread and milk—and I had enough to eat, and every now and then there'd be a ten-dollar bill on the couch where I slept, so I guess she knew who I was at least some of the time. Maybe she was trying to take care of me the best she could and just thought it better not to talk to me. I don't know.

One day I came home and there were some men in the apartment and the landlady, Mrs. Gunder, who looked like a witch, screamed at me, "How could you not notice the smell?"

There were always smells and I hadn't noticed anything in particular. Now I smelled something that was different from the mix of food and liquor smells. One of the men said that Mother had been dead in her bedroom at least three days.

I was taken to a place and a man in uniform took me to a dorm. Just one boy was lying on a cot in there. The man showed me a cot and said I should sleep there, and left.

The boy came over and sat on the next cot. He had bright eyes and

a crooked smile. I think it was the first time anybody ever gave me a smile and said anything like, "Hi. I'm Roy Harper. Who are you?"

I told him, wondering why he wanted to know.

"What are you in for?"

I didn't know what he meant.

He smiled again. "Playing it cool. Smart. But I'll tell you what I'm in for. Stealing a car."

He gave a laugh and rocked on the cot. "That was a beautiful car. A new Merc. But I got careless, piled it up. I'd have got away clean otherwise. Like I always done before."

He looked fifteen. And had been arrested for stealing a car, which he'd done before. I was seventeen and had never done anything.

"I'm good," he said, rocking on the cot. "I'm very good. Suffick knows it."

I just looked at him.

"You know Suffick?"

I shook my head. I was feeling strange. No one had ever talked to me so much before.

"He has a repair shop downtown. You see his ads in the paper. Older guy, about forty. My brother took me to meet him. My brother's in jail now. He told Suffick I was really good, and Suffick had me show him how I could get into a car that was locked and start it. I can get into any car. I did a lot for Suffick. He's a very decent guy. He'd tell me what he wanted and I'd get forty bucks for bringing it in."

I said, "Did your brother work for him?" Just to say something.

"No, Earl's not into cars. He works for guys who want someone leaned on. He's 220 and six-foot-two. Did some amateur boxing and got knocked out a few times and they made him quit. But he's very tough. He's doing three years now, should be out next year. He'll do all right—he's a very likeable guy."

"Is this a jail?"

"This place? No way. What you in for?"

"My mother died."

"Then you're an orphan, I guess, but you're too old for the orphanage so they put you in here. This is for waywards. I'm a wayward. They'll put me out pretty soon, to a foster home. I'll cut out of there after a little and go back to Suffick."

"Go back to work for him?"

"No, that wouldn't be cool. He'll get me down to Arizona—there's a guy got a farm there. Suffick told me about it. I'll go down and be the guy's nephew and work there on the farm." He laughed. "The guy's got a lot of nephews, sometimes a dozen or more staying there at a time. It's a big place, the guy's got good connections, nobody bothers him. It's the place to go and lie low for a while. I'll go there and then they'll connect me somewhere else, where I can do what I'm good at."

"It sounds like some kind of family."

"Better. Families, everyone's pulling for their own thing, pulling against each other. This way you're pulling for your own thing but you're all pulling kind of the same way. No baloney, nobody crying and telling you why'd you do this, why don't you show some regard for our feelings? You do things the way you're told, and do 'em right. It's better like that. Things are clear. If you do good, they like you, they'll see you get taken care of."

He lay back on the cot, folded his hands on his stomach, and looked up at the ceiling. "Look, I'm going to tell you something. I don't know you from nothing, but I got a feel about you. I go by my feel about people. I think you're all right." He turned his head, looked at me. "Anybody ever tell you that?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. You got nothing, you know nothing, you been nowhere. Does that make you a fool? No. It makes you maybe ready to listen to something that might do you some good."

I was listening.

"You got no friends. Including me. I'm not your friend—but I'm talking to you. I'm a punk, O.K.? But Suffick told me a lot.

"He told me, 'You got a long way to go. If you got anything going for you on the straight side don't mess with this stuff. But if you're like Earl and know you can't fit in—you can go this way. It's not easy, don't kid yourself it's easy—you'll do time, probably—most do. Some guys are in and out, in and out. Some go in and never come out. All right—but it's a life, see?'

"That's what Suffick told me. And he said, 'You'll be part of something. Trying to get somewhere, getting good at what you do. It's like a flow—and if you go to jail, that's part of the flow. Flow in, flow out—in jail or out, you're in the flow. And not alone.'"

He lay there looking at me. After a little he said, "That's what Suffick

told me. And that's the way it is. So if you got something in the straight world, go for it. If not—" He shrugged.

I said, "Should I see this Suffick when I get out?"

"No. You got no talent to bring him. Do something first."

"Like what?"

"Something so it gets known that you're ready for the flow."

"I'd mess up. I'd go to jail."

He took a breath, let it out. "Maybe you're just not bright. What did I just tell you? Jail's part of the flow. If you're afraid of that, forget it."

I sat and thought things over while he lay with his eyes closed. I thought of the life I'd had and what was ahead of me.

That was back in 1956. I got out on my own in 1957, worked in a grocery, and got fired for messing things up. Then I washed dishes and broke too many. I tried to get in the Army but they didn't want me. I panhandled and ate at the Salvation Army.

I was passing a grocery. A fussy little woman was putting a couple of bags in the trunk of her car. The keys were hanging out of the trunk lock. I reached over her and nabbed them, and ran to the car and started it up.

The trunk lid was up and I couldn't see back there, and hoped she'd had the sense to run clear. I heard her screeching. I wanted to back the car out of the space, but I'd never driven a car before and didn't know where to put the gear to make the car go back. I'd known enough to start it from seeing guys start cars in movies, but that was all I knew. So I tried to move the gear but it was standard transmission and I didn't know anything about the clutch. The woman was screeching and people came around and finally the cops came and I got taken away.

They didn't charge me with car theft—maybe the woman didn't press it. I was back in the street the next day.

The day after I walked past a woman and hooked her purse and walked on. She didn't screech. I turned and looked and she was gone. Maybe she'd stolen the purse herself. I was walking down the street with a purple beaded purse and in those days that looked funny and people stared.

I walked until I saw a cop directing traffic. I walked out to him when he signaled cars to stop and said, "I just stole this purse."

He shot me a hard look, took the purse, opened it, looked in, turned it over, shook it—there was nothing in it.

"Who'd you steal it from?"

"I don't know."

"Leave me alone. I'm busy. Get back on the curb!"

I left him and walked up the street. I passed a little girl and gave her the purse.

I mention those things because they show I wasn't skilled or suited to do anything very well. Even get arrested.

But the third time, I went into a liquor store and with my hand in my jacket pocket told the man it was a stickup. He was very scared and gave me the money from the till. It was about a hundred dollars.

I went out and walked around the neighborhood and after an hour or so a cop car pulled up next to me and I was arrested.

I got two years. Jail wasn't bad. I met some people and learned things, and when I got out I knew where to go to get a gun.

I robbed people at night, on the street. I never had to pull the trigger. Four times I was picked up by cops and run through identification parades and the last time I got a heavy jolt—five years—but I was out in three. And by now I knew people and where to go.

I never went to Suffick because he'd been shot and stuffed in the trunk of one of his stolen cars—I read that in the paper. I never saw Harper or heard of him. I guess he went back East or somewhere and did what he was good at back there.

A lot surer of myself now and feeling part of something, I met a woman and we got married. She was the first woman I'd ever known. She'd been in the flow all her life and wanted to try the straight side, wanted us to move to Florida, where she was from, and her dad would put me to work in his carpentry shop. I knew that wouldn't work and she left me. Then there were other women.

I worked at my night stuff and did pretty well, made a few friends, then got arrested again, did four years—and a month after getting out went back for four more. For some reason I didn't get life as an incorrigible. You have luck or you don't, and on the whole I'd say I've had it. It might not hold up, but I don't worry about it—if I get life I'll bear up. Jail's got its good side.

I'm over forty now. I've been in the flow twenty-three years, with a total of thirteen in jail. I have to go with what Suffick told Harper all those years ago. If you can do anything in the straight world, go to it—if you can't, well. I chose the convict flow.



I don't regret it. I have a nice woman I'm living with. She's got a kid who's not too bad—we have a good apartment, nice neighbors. I've had good times, some bad times. I hope I have a lot more years ahead.

It's a better life than I'd have had otherwise. Even in jail. Fair food usually, a warm place to sleep, some good guys, a TV that works, and mostly I've always felt part of something.

Better than standing alone, being alone, with everything flowing on by.

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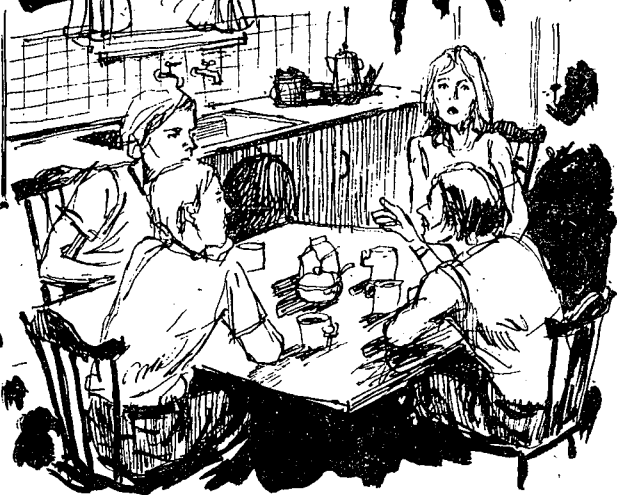
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*The previous tenant, Dicky told them, had been a murderer . . .*

# THE LISTENING

by  
CELIA  
DALE



I have to tell someone. But who? They'd think I was mad. Or that Nicky—I'm frightened, frightened. And I'm not that kind of person at all really. People always say I'm so capable, so level-headed. And I am. So if I write it all down perhaps I'll be able to see that it's all imagination, that it's not really—

Nicky and I started a thing together about two years ago. I was living with two girls and he was in some sort of a grotty commune, so it wasn't

all that easy for us to be together. I simply can't do private things in semi-public—people in the next room or due back in half an hour. Nor could Nicky, really, though he pretends he could. The thing is, we've both been "brought up proper." And although he really has broken away I can't honestly say I have. He left Marlborough before taking his A levels and then he dropped out of the London School of Economics because he had this fantastic offer to help start up a sort of pop-art magazine, but it only came out once. I left home and got a job, of course, and went through various phases, but underneath it all I really like to be tidy and organized, and I daresay that's why I got a good job that really interests me and pays a bomb.

And really, actually, I'd like to be married. I know it's silly and no one does now unless they're having a baby or something, but I can't help it. I'd just awfully like to be Nicky's legal, lawful wife. Of course I've never said so, absolutely never so much as hinted. But I suppose he might have guessed.

I really do love him. It's not just that I think he's beautiful—he's sort of fine-boned and ethereal although he's as strong as a horse—but that I love even his faults. He's terribly moody and highly strung, especially when his work's not going right. Then he just goes into a silence. Withdraws absolutely. It's horrible, but I do love him and so I always try and help him come back to me. Usually I can—

To go back to what I was saying first, I decided—we decided—we had to find a place together on our own. The idea didn't grab him at first, but after we'd talked it over a bit he said great.

Well, I looked and looked and you wouldn't believe the grotty places people think people will pay them to live in. Basements you could grow mushrooms in, attics the rain comes into, crumbly bits of furniture, filthy old gas stoves. I looked and looked and if there was ever anything halfway decent it had gone before I got there. I began to get really frantic. You know how it is if you finally decide you want to do something—you simply get frantic if you can't do it at once. Nicky said to give it a rest, we'd look again later, but I really did want to be with him on our own. Besides, he hadn't been well—bronchitis or something—and he was looking more and more as though he was made of glass. I longed to take care of him and fatten him up a bit and well, just love him. I do love him.

Then I found it. It was the first floor of one of those terribly ugly Victorian semis in north London, yellowy brick and a portico, laurels in

front with the dustbins, a straggly garden at the back. Two decent rooms and a bath with a cover over it in the kitchen, and a few bits of not-too-grotty furniture. The road was dreary, but opposite they'd built a new school, all glass and flat roofs, so we could see the sky instead of just other ugly houses. Somehow I'd managed to be there first and I had to decide at once, so I did. I paid six months in advance and we moved in the next week.

Nick was funny about it. He prowled around like a cat, sort of sniffing the atmosphere. "It's got a funny feel to it," he said. "Sort of—I don't know—echoes."

"Vibes?" I said, sort of pulling his leg.

"Yes, maybe. It's sort of—cold."

"Of course it's cold. It's been empty. An empty place is always cold."

We painted it up a bit and moved in our own bits and pieces. Nick hadn't much but I'd got—or soon bought—quite a bit: some rugs, and I made curtains, and we had big cushions to sit on, and a kitchen table. I'd got a lot of saucepans and china because I like cooking, and Mummy and Daddy gave us a bed, which was jolly nice of them, really, because I don't expect they approved, but they never said a word.

Oh, it was heaven. I'd get up early and clean and polish before Nick woke up and think what we'd have for dinner. I'd leave him just waking up, with coffee and an apple—that's all he ever wants—and go off to work, already longing to get back. In the evening I'd hurry home with lovely things to cook and jobs to do like cushion covers or shelves or something.

But sometimes he'd be in a mood and I knew he'd not had a good day. Other times, though, we simply fell into each other's arms and went to bed then and there and had our meal afterwards. And almost all our nights were full of love—really warm loving connubial love—that's a lovely word, connubial. Solid, secure. Like my parents.

And he really seemed content. Sort of stretched out and relaxed, as if he liked this way of life after all. It was bliss. For a little while.

He'd always had moods, but I hoped that with me they'd grow less because he'd be as happy as I was. But they didn't. After the first week or two they began to come back. You see, I was out all day and he was there on his own and when I got back he was often all pent up and I'd get it all. Sometimes it was just silence. I hated that. He'd just sort of grunt if I said anything—sagged down on the cushions, not reading, just sort of shut away. But sometimes he'd be restless, walking about with a

sort of listening look, although he wouldn't listen to *me*. The restlessness was new. Before, he'd always been rather passive—sunk down in his own gloom, if you know what I mean.

Well, we'd been there about a month when one day he suddenly said, "I hate this place."

I was using the blender and couldn't hear properly and shouted, "What?"

He absolutely yelled back, "*I hate this place! I hate this bloody—place!*"

I switched it off. "Nicky, you can't! It's lovely, it's perfect—"

"It's a bloody prison. It hedges me in. You've not been alone here all day, listening, wondering—"

"Wondering? What about?"

"Everything. What we're doing here, what people did here before. What goes on."

"Nothing goes on except us. It's *ours!*"

"Is it?" He gave me a funny look. "It's yours, maybe, not mine. I *hate* the bloody place." Then he went silent and wouldn't speak again for a long time.

I thought I knew what it was. You see, in a way he was right. The flat *was* more mine than his, because I earned more money than he did. Well, actually, I earned it all because I had this fantastic job I really loved and it paid a bomb while Nicky earned nothing at all. He's a writer. That magazine thing was just the beginning. Really he was writing two things, a novel about being a student and dropping out and finding yourself, and then this fantastic television series, sort of plays which acted out all the various philosophical concepts in terms of modern economics that he hoped BBC-2 would do, only it was taking ages because it was all so deep, and he didn't know anyone in TV to give him encouragement.

Of course he couldn't possibly have done a job at the same time as all this writing, so naturally I paid for everything, and that was fine. I mean, what does it matter who pays? It was *us*, wasn't it? And lots and lots of men live off their women— Oh, that sounds horrid, it's not like that a bit. I mean, I had the money, I was earning, so what the hell—me or Social Security? I loved him to. I wanted him to.

Only the thing is, although he agreed in theory, you can't have parents and schools and upbringing like ours and get rid of it all as easily as that. I mean, look at me and my feeling I'd like to be married. What difference does it make whether we are or not? How silly can you get? But I suppose

that just as I felt about that, Nicky felt about me being the breadwinner, deep down. I suppose that was it.

We'd got plenty of friends and they'd all loved the flat and said how lucky we were and all that. We'd been there about six weeks when Ben, who I've known forever, and this friend of Nicky's were there drinking coffee. It was late, after midnight. Nicky never wants to go to bed—not to sleep, anyway—and Dicky never does either. That's sort of his nickname—he's Nicky's oldest friend, like Ben is mine. They were at school together and went to LSE together—only Dicky stayed on—and they got called Nicky and Dicky (his name's Derek really) because they were always around together. Dicky's blond and very good-looking, but he's got that sort of mocking, amusing, light way about him that makes people laugh but is spiteful underneath very often. Especially about me. I've never said anything because maybe I've imagined it, and Nicky'd be furious. But I've seen the way Dicky looks at him sometimes and the way he looks at me, and he's always calling me "the little homemaker" or "our career lady," two things Nicky absolutely doesn't want.

So we were all there that evening with our mugs of coffee and Ben said something about going home and Dicky said something about it being hard to leave the cozy nest. Then he said, "You really have done wonders, love—no one would ever know. And it doesn't bother you?"

"What should bother us?" I said.

"Why—what it was." Then he paused and looked at us in a sort of mock-concerned way. "You can't mean you don't *know*?"

"Know what?" asked Ben.

"This is where that murder was. A few years back."

"A murder?" Only Ben spoke.

"Yes, an 'orrible murder. You can't mean you didn't know?" He knew we didn't. "A feller strangled his wife, then stuffed her in the cupboard." He waved a hand. "That one, I shouldn't wonder. He went on living here, going to work every day, then he killed himself. The neighbors found him, then the police found her. You *must* remember—it was the juiciest since poor old Christie."

Ben had gone scarlet and shouted, "You bloody oaf, what d'you want to say *that* for?" But I couldn't say anything and Nicky simply sat there staring at Dicky with his mouth half open and an awful sort of glazed look on his face.

After that the absolute nightmare began. Actual nightmare for me. I'd struggle awake trying to scream, and when I managed to thrash myself awake I'd find Nicky lying there beside me with his eyes open, wide awake, as though looking at something, listening to something, far apart from me. If I clung to him he'd respond absently, as though he wasn't really there. And in the morning he'd sometimes pretend to be asleep when I left.

We never talked about what Dicky had said but I thought about it all the time. I thought about the fury and terror of the thing itself, but, more, I thought about the days and nights afterwards, the horror and fear and grief when that man was here alone, pretending to the outside world, living with his inside hell.

To shut my mind against it, I busied myself more and more with making the flat our own, bright and clean and new, and I wrapped Nicky round with all the love that was in me to blot out his thoughts too. I thought about moving and looked at advertisements in newspapers and on notice boards—I even went to see one or two without telling Nicky, for I couldn't let him see how upset I was. All my thoughts were on calming him, pretending it hadn't happened, we'd not been told, there was nothing to know. But housing was even more hopeless now than when we'd found the flat. And we'd still got nearly four months paid for. How could we leave? As soon as we could, we would. I'd go on looking but not say anything to Nicky, not let him know how frightened I was by what Dicky's words had done to us both.

He was so silent, much more than before. Or else very gay—in the old use of the word. A sort of frantic gaiety that seemed to glitter and flash, as though he were made of metal. I guessed he'd been seeing Dicky when he was like that.

I don't know what he did when I was at work all day, but he wasn't writing. When I asked him about it he looked at me oddly and said, "I can't write now. I'm not that sort of person any more."

One evening I came back and he was just sitting in the dark. He didn't say hello or anything, just sat there looking at me with a peculiar sort of laughter in his face as though he had some private joke which was—I don't know—spiteful somehow.

He watched me a bit and then said, "They weren't married, you know. They were just living together—like us."

"Who?" But I knew.

"Ted Frensham and his girl. The former tenants." He grinned. "She was pregnant."

I blurted out, "I'm not pregnant."

"Great. But she was. I read it all up in the library, in back files of the newspapers. She was nagging him to get married."

"I don't want to hear about it." I made as much noise as I could with the supper pots and pans. He just sat there grinning.

"He left a note when he killed himself—on the mantelpiece, I expect—there." He gestured toward it. "He said he felt hemmed in. Trapped. I can understand that."

"I can't. He could have gone away."

"Perhaps he didn't really want to." Then he got up and came over to me and put his arms around me, and for a little while he was the Nicky I'd loved forever.

But that was the last time. Bit by bit it was as though a shadow was growing somewhere. It was at the back of his eyes when he was in one of his silences and it was somewhere just behind me sometimes, just out of sight—a shadow, a shape, a feeling. I knew it was all imagination. Dicky had done it on purpose to break up Nicky and me. He knew how suggestible Nicky was, even if the story hadn't been true. But it *was* true, and he'd made sure Nicky went and checked up on it. Ted Frensham *had* murdered his girl friend in Haylett Road seven years ago, and how could we not believe that the echoes could still be heard?

"You're a great pair," said Dicky next time we were all together. "The stuff the Empire was made of. Horror movie into love nest with a wave of the homemaker's wand. No ghostly tappings or moanings or mysterious chills in the night. No malign presence. Love conquers all."

"Belt up," said Ben. "When people are dead they're dead—it's over and done with."

"You don't believe in ghosts?" Dicky sneered. "In sensitives who can pick up the violence left behind?"

"No, I don't!"

"Nicky does." Dicky smiled. "But Nicky's a sensitive. He knows things get left behind when murder's been done."

Ben hit him. Not very hard, because they were both sitting down, but he cut Dicky's lip.

"There," Dicky said, "you see—violence is still here."



It's hard to describe the next bit. It wasn't just Nick, it was me too. The flat wasn't ours any more. It was as though there was always someone else in the next room, keeping quiet, holding their breath, listening. Listening to Nick listening. Some of the time I didn't feel it. After being out all day, I made myself busy and cheerful when I got back, we played records and had friends in or went out. But when we were on our own, if we were quiet, then, behind the next-room door, outside in the passage, the listening began again. I'd get up and go into that room or out in the passage, banging my feet, terrified but determined to face it out, but it was always empty, quite silent. And then presently, in a different place, the listening would start again, the shadow grow again.

That's all I ever heard—the listening. But Nick heard and saw more. He didn't tell me, but I knew. I could see him begin to draw away from me, just sitting, his eyes alert, flickering as though trying to follow something, trying to hear something. When I tried to get near him he almost snarled at me. He wouldn't eat the things I bought especially because he liked them. When we made love, which was hardly ever now, he didn't care about me at all—it was just quick and savage, as though he hated me. A different Nicky looked out of his eyes and hated me.

At last I said, "Nick, let's leave. Let's go away for a bit. We can go to a hotel even. I can pay."

"I'm sure you can," he said, and his face and his voice were horrible. "Big earner, big boss lady. Why not ask Daddy to buy us a nice little semi with room for a pram in the patio? You go if you want to, Go on, get out if you want to."

I began to cry. He just stared at me. "That's right," he said, and his voice wasn't a bit like his, but rough and with a sort of accent, "you always cry, don't you, you cow? That's how you got me, isn't it? That's how you bloody trapped me in the first place!"

He slammed out of the room.

The listening closed in on me like a fog and through it all there seemed to run a sort of snigger.

I should have gone. But I loved him. How could I leave him on his own in that place with whatever was creeping in on him, taking him over, my poor unhappy love? I was stronger than he was—tougher. I suppose he resented it, resented all the things I was and he wasn't, like being successful and earning a lot and being efficient and level-headed and well, yes, conventional, even if not by Daddy and Mummy's standards.

But it was more than that now. He was changing. He was Nicky, yes—high-strung and insecure—but he was someone else too, someone ugly and vengeful and bottled up, someone whose violences lurked in the empty rooms, behind closed doors, under the floors, listening, whispering, reaching out to enter and take possession.

At work I was promoted. I was given a whole small section of my own. It meant more money, and I went out without telling Nicky and found us a super bed-sit, kitchen, and bath in a modern block of flats with no character and no ghosts, mortgaging my pay for a month's rent starting the following week. We would be free again. Ted Frensham couldn't follow us there. We'd be on our own, as we'd been before, and Nick would start writing again and love me again and all would be well.

I went home and told Nicky. We still had two months to run on the flat, I pointed out, but I didn't care.

He was sitting in the dark as usual—twilight really, because the days were getting longer and the birds were still settling down in the trees outside the window. I took some things through to the kitchen and came back, taking off my coat. "So we'll pack up at the weekend and be out of here Sunday," I said. "We can use Ben's car—he won't mind going back and forth. We can leave what we haven't room for until we find a really permanent place."

He got very slowly to his feet. "You bitch," he said. "You bossy, arrogant, interfering bitch." He came towards me. "D'you think I'm going on sponging off you? D'you think you can tie me up and lug me off like I was a piece of furniture? D'you think I'm going to be tied to you and some squalling filthy little brat for the rest of my days? I've had enough, d'you hear me? I've had a bloody 'nough!"

He reached out and put his hands around my neck and began to choke me. I couldn't scream and I pulled and pulled at his fingers but they were like wire biting into me. His whole body was trembling as though a current was passing through it and up his arms and into his fingers, pressing and pressing. His face was sort of swimming above me as my knees gave way. I began to fall but was held up by those wiry, trembling arms. His lips were drawn back and he looked like a dog snarling, a dog intent on a bone, fixed and savage—

The telephone rang, a shocking sound. For a moment we hung there,

he and I, frozen—me practically on my knees with my hands trying to undo his, he bending over me, wire arms braced to the fingers. A dazed look came over his face and he dropped me. I fell to the floor, choking and sobbing. In a daze he stared at the telephone as it rang and rang. Then he crossed the room and lifted the receiver. A voice squawked in it.

"Yes," Nick said thickly. "Yes. You what?" His gaze moved to me and a kind of horror began to thaw the mask that had been his face. "Gone? I see. Well, thanks. Yes, sure. I'll tell her."

He put down the receiver though the telephone still squawked, and stood staring at me, his face seeming to break up and disintegrate like something under water.

"That was Ben," he said. He sat down slowly. "He checked at the Town Hall. The Frensham house was opposite. Where the school is."

I had pulled myself to my feet. "The school?"

"The Frensham house was pulled down. It's gone. He never lived here."

I croaked, "Never lived here? The murder wasn't—?"

We stared at each other. It was dark by now, but a street lamp shone in. Nick was a black shape motionless against the window.

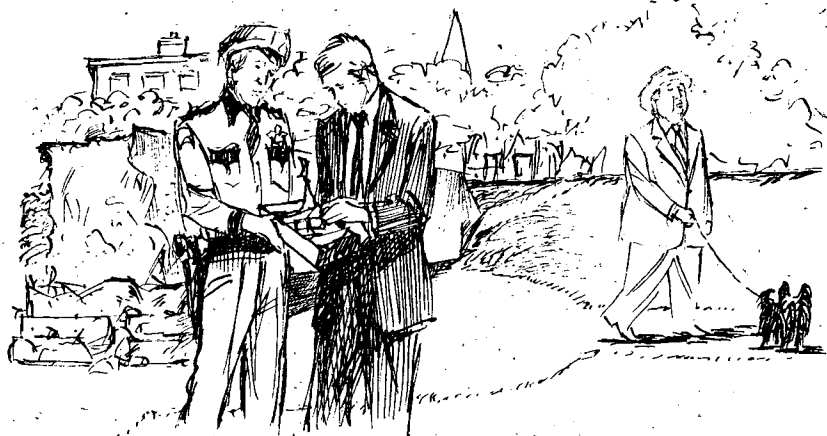
He said dully, "He never lived here. He was never here. There was only us."



*It was hotter than blazes in Kiner . . .*

# THE TIME CAPSULE

by GARY ALEXANDER



**E**ven though I was half asleep, and I hadn't seen or talked to Mac Lindsay in five years, I recognized his voice in an instant. A baritone, but not a singer. The same childlike enthusiasm in his inflections.

"Doug Powell? I didn't interrupt anything important, did I?"

"Mmmph." Not a glimmer of dawnlight on the bedroom curtains. The telephone's ring still caromed inside my head: "Mac. What the hell time is it?"

"Dougie, are you in engineering these days? Are you collecting coins?"

No "hello," no "how's the family," just a nocturnal question-and-answer session. "Yes on the engineering, Mac. I'm a partner in a consulting firm. No on the hobby. I've still got most of my collection, but I haven't been actively buying and selling."

"Yeah, I remembered it from school," he said. "You had a stack of coin books a mile high. We have a little problem here and the town dads wouldn't spring a nickel to hire experts on both subjects, even if they had it. You have the know-how I could dearly need. I wonder if you could get on over here for a few days."

"It's what, Wednesday? You mean right now?"

"I knew you'd come through for me, Dougie," Mac said. "I'll see you this afternoon. We'll crack a couple of cold ones. It's hotter than blazes." And he hung up.

I sat up, trying to clear my head. I had graduated in engineering the same year Mac got his degree in criminology. We'd been roommates our junior and senior years. We'd been known without affection by the monitors of the South Dorm as the animals in 407. Good times.

Mac signed on immediately with the local police department, but soon grumbled that he wasn't cut out for big-city law enforcement. I joined the largest manufacturer in town, one of seven zillion engineers hunched over drawing boards in a room the size of a football stadium. We saw each other often, usually in beer parlors, where we drank, shot pool, and griped. We each had a thing about independence.

Then a consulting opportunity came along for me and I grabbed it with both hands. About the same time, the police chief in Kiner, Mac's hometown, retired. He applied for the job and was accepted.

We both got married soon afterward. He left, I stayed. We promised to stay in touch. Except for Christmas cards, we didn't.

Judy was awake too. Partially. She nudged me and mumbled, "Who was that at this hour?"

"Obscene phone call," I said, settling back down on the pillow. I'd tell her over breakfast. She wasn't going to like it.

Kiner is a small town in the eastern part of the state, in orchard country. Mac, in his last letter, years ago, had expressed a fondness for the slow pace. I recalled him mentioning that his biggest crisis as police chief was that the radar unit on one of his two squad cars had gone on the blink.

I entered the town's main street, a two-lane stretch of five or six blocks with storefronts on each side. Cars parked diagonally; there were no meters. The courthouse was located about halfway through, across the street from a park.

It was a bucolic setting, a Norman Rockwell town. But it wasn't for me. I thrive on the stresses and anxieties of big city life, ingredients that would be in short supply around here.

I parked adjacent to the courthouse steps and climbed out, kinked up and sore from the four-hour drive. I noticed a group of people in the center of the park beyond the shade trees. I couldn't tell if there was a commotion or not because my concentration was broken by Mac's booming voice.

I remembered Mac once telling me something interesting about the park, but he was on me with a huge grin and a viselike handshake before I could recall what it was. Mac, a rangy sort and still in trim, had played frosh football at school. I don't imagine he has much trouble with the local hell-raisers.

"Doug, it's good to see you."

"I'm holding you to that promise of a cold one," I said, standing beside my car and its air-conditioning. "This has to be the sunstroke capital of the world."

"That's why the apples we raise bring top dollar back East," he said. He handed the deputy with him a five. "How about getting us a first-aid kit at the grocery, Johnny? If Dougie dies of thirst, I'll never hear the end of it."

Mac pointed us in the direction of the park and the milling people. "I want to show you something right off. Everyone's pretty upset about it."

We approached the middle of the park. Walkways converged from the surrounding sidewalks, meeting at a circular slab of concrete roughly eight feet in diameter. A large piece of granite in the shape of a truncated obelisk, which obviously belonged atop the cement disk, had been toppled on its side, half on its base, half off. The top of the slab and the bottom of the obelisk had been milled smooth and airtight. A cavity made inside the slab when it was poured was now empty.

I snapped my fingers.

"The time capsule."

"I'm afraid so," Mac said. "It happened last night. I had the duty.

Except for one visit to the Hoskinson widow who called about strange noises, I was at my desk. I was away thirty minutes at the most. This thing has to weigh five tons. They must've had a helluva crew. Nobody I've talked to so far heard any large machinery moving through town."

I examined the damage, first reading the inscription carved into one face of the obelisk:

KINER CITY TIME CAPSULE

AUGUST 4, 1943

DONATED AND ERECTED

BY

THE CITIZENS OF

KINER

TO BE SEALED UNTIL

AUGUST 4, 2043

"That's one of the two reasons I asked you to come," Mac said. "The consensus is that they needed a small cherry-picker crane similar to the sort they used thirty-eight years ago to set on the monument. Trouble is, nobody heard anything and we've got some light sleepers in town. Maybe there's engineering equipment we don't know about that could get the job done too. You're up-to-date in the field, so who better to ask."

I studied the base of the obelisk more closely. A crude notch had been chiseled out of the side facing up. An edge of the slab in line with it showed fresh wear.

"I'd say two men, Mac. Three at the most. No cranes either."

He raised his eyebrows. "Hercules and Samson?"

"There are six basic machines, Mac. Every mechanical device we have now is based on them. The lever is one. I forget who it was, Aristotle or Euclid maybe. He said: 'Give me a lever long enough and I can move the world.' In this case, a two-by-four wouldn't do the trick—too much weight—but a long steel bar would, with the edge of the slab where it's scraped being the fulcrum. They notched it out and one guy sat on the end of the bar. Possibly he got it up a half inch on the first try. Then his pal slipped something in to hold it so they could shove the bar in further and raise it some more. And so on until pretty soon gravity did the rest."

"Evidently I'll have to readjust my thinking," Mac said. "I'd boiled it

down to a motorcycle gang with mufflers on their Harleys, relieving their boredom as they passed through town."

"Sorry."

The deputy returned with a large paper bag. "The brew's on your desk, Mac."

"Then what's this?" I asked.

Mac lifted from the bag a container the size and shape of a shoe box. It was constructed of stainless steel with a small fitting, which I assumed was installed for the evacuation of air. The top of the container had been peeled back crudely, without love or reverence or the slightest twinge of nostalgia. It had been ripped open in haste, aided by a chisel and a pry bar. Oddly, it bulged with memorabilia to the point of overflowing.

"So what's missing?" I asked.

"That's the funny thing," Mac said, taking a list from his shirt pocket. "Nineteen forty-three was the hundredth anniversary of the founding of Kiner. Much of what's in here is data, newspaper stories, and photos, all on microfilm. Plus assorted junk." He read, "An Ovaltine label. Some razor blades. A comic book, can opener, et cetera. The trivia of the day. Everything's intact but for the coins."

"What coins?"

Mac cocked his head toward the courthouse and we started back. Passersby were obviously interested in who I was and what Mac was saying.

"I haven't yet made an announcement of what's missing," Mac said quietly. "If it's a local I want to give him every opportunity to make a mistake. The coins were 1943s, one of each denomination. Is there anything especially rare about them?"

I shrugged. "There would be some collector value and the half, quarter, and dime were silver. Some silver in the nickel too, I think, because of a wartime nickel shortage. If they were uncirculated or in a proof set, they could be worth two hundred dollars maybe. But nothing in that year was exceptionally rare. I have a coin book in my luggage though. I'll look it over to be sure."

We stopped at my car while I rummaged through my overnight bag. Mac said, "There are a lot of noses bent out of shape here because of this. People in Kiner usually spend their entire lives here. Half the town has a relative or another who was involved in the project. They regard it as a desecration."



I found the book. It was several years old, but it would serve our purpose.

"Were the contents of the capsule a secret?"

"Nope. In fact, the story of the capsule along with the list and some newspaper photos are on one wall of the library. The park was being completed at the time and the townspeople wanted something interesting to set it off. A statue or plaque in honor of the town's founder, Homer Kiner, was kind of out of the question. Story is he was a rough character and met his end in a brawl in a Seattle whorehouse."

"Not suitable," I agreed.

"Not at all, so they decided on the capsule. The idea had been kicked around since the 1939 New York World's Fair. If New York could do it, so could we, was the general feeling. But it was decided that five thousand years was too long, so they settled on an even century."

"You're about sixty years short."

"Afraid so," Mac said, leading me into his office. It wasn't air-conditioned but on his desk was a cold, dewy six-pack.

"John's a good man," Mac said, popping the tops of two cans. "I'll have to promote him to sergeant for this assignment."

I paged through the coin book, then said, "I don't see anything out of the ordinary, but is it possible a valuable coin of some kind was slipped into the capsule?"

Mac said, "I'm way ahead of you. Milt Hastings, who had a blacksmith shop on Third Street, built the capsule. He's been dead for a number of years. The Ladies' Library Society had the capsule made, filled it, and had it soldered shut. Nine women were on that committee and most were old then. Only three survive. Two are in Spokane nursing homes. I'm getting an interview assist from the SPD on them. Emily Tregoning, the chairwoman of the project, is the only other. She's a very young ninety and lives in a small house north of town. She and her late husband built the house when they settled in Kiner. When we finish our suds we'll go out and see her."

Emily Tregoning lived in an immaculate white cottage a block east of the city limits sign. I had expected to see her in a rocking chair, wearing a shawl. She was outside in her well-tended garden, staking up her tomato plants.

Mac introduced us and she invited us inside to talk. She wore coveralls

and walked briskly. When she offered us refreshments, I anticipated tea or lemonade. Instead, she poured us coffee-cupfuls of her homemade applejack. It was good, but potent enough to etch metal.

Mac explained what had happened. Emily had heard about the incident, but could offer no help. We thanked her and rose to leave.

"Wait a second," she said. "Robert was home then. Now I remember. He gave me a shiny new penny to put in the capsule. He said it was his contribution to his hometown. He always was a cynical little bastard. Dropped out of school a year or so before he graduated and ran away. He managed to get himself a government job but came home for a while when he was fired. Stayed home a month or two and took off again. He got into trouble, including jail. The last I saw him was in '57 or '58 when he was out on parole. His father had been dead a year by then. I think Robert had something to do with hastening his death. Mr. Tregoning never could accept that his only son was such a rotten apple."

"That's all he put in, a single penny?" Mac asked.

"That's it. Shiny, bright copper. Big spender. Probably the limit of his generosity," Emily said.

After we drove back to Mac's office, Mac ran a request for a make on Robert Tregoning. I expressed some surprise that the Kiner Police Department had a teletype.

"It's a great help when we're trying to identify a stagecoach robber," Mac countered.

Moments later a reply clattered forth. Mac tore off a long sheet of paper and read it silently. "Busy boy," he said then and read off Robert Tregoning's long and undistinguished criminal record, decoding as he went. "One small-time violation after another," he summarized. "Burglary, shoplifting, check kiting. I doubt if he cleared more than two hundred bucks on any of them. He was released two weeks ago from Walla Walla, paroled on a habitual criminal send-up."

"How about the 1943 period?" I asked.

Mac studied the sheet. "The only federal charge on his sheet was dropped for lack of evidence. It's not very specific—something to do with the theft of government materiel. He was a laborer at the Denver Mint."

I slapped my forehead, and scribbled a coin description on a piece of paper. "I should have caught on when we were at Emily's, but I suppose I've been away from the hobby too long. Send this off. I'll explain later."

Mac shrugged and put out a bulletin to police departments in the area.

The phone rang before I could explain. Mac took down some information, hung up, and said, "It looks like you're going to miss out on Sandy's world-class pot roast. Feel like taking a little drive?"

Not really, I thought. "Sure, where?"

"Spokane. It's only about an hour. The highway's straight as an arrow and goes right into the horizon. I'll flick on the lights and open it up."

I grabbed the rest of the rapidly warming six-pack and followed him out. "Quick results."

"Yeah, not ten minutes before my blurb came in to Spokane, a coin dealer called, about to wet his pants. He had a couple of middle-aged guys come in offering that shiny new '43 penny for sale. He stalled them, saying he had to authenticate it. They're due back at six. We can just make it if the engine doesn't blow."

As many are, the coin shop was in an older part of town. It was cramped and seedy, but no shoestring operation—one look in the display case and all the gold and old silver pieces confirmed that. Two Spokane detectives were waiting for us. One went out and sat in his car across the street. The rest of us went into the back room after Mac and the detective assured the nervous proprietor that he was in good hands.

At six sharp the front door opened. Mac and the detective squinted out through a curtain. Not more than a minute later, they rushed out. I entered the main part of the store as two badly dressed man in their late fifties were being handcuffed and marched outside.

Mac said, "Dougie, it worked out fine. We grabbed them as Mr. Selkirk here handed them their coin, but there is one minor problem. There are no serial numbers on coins. How can we prove this is the same one?"

"Law of averages," I said. "Was that Tregoning?"

"In the flesh. And I think we'll learn his pal was a former roomie at Walla Walla. One of the detectives recognized him. He's been a low-rent-wise guy around here since you and I were wearing underwear that had safety pins. Now about this coin—"

"Nineteen forty-three was a unique numismatic year in one respect," I said. "So unique, in fact, that this particular coin wasn't even mentioned in the coin book I brought. There couldn't have been more than a handful struck, and I'd forgotten all about it."

"Nineteen forty-three was the only year ever that pennies weren't made of copper, unless you want to include the few aluminum cents that were

struck a few years ago as an experiment. They didn't quite get returned by the congressmen who were examining them and will bring a bundle when they're finally sold, but that's another story.

"Because of a wartime scarcity of copper, 1943 pennies were steel with a zinc coating. But only in 1943. In '44 and '45 the Mint went back to what they called 'shell case copper,' derived from scrap.

"A few, however, were struck on copper planchets by mistake in 1943. They're so scarce, some collectors even deny their existence."

Mac said, "So Robert and his friend learned of its value and came back for it. How much is it worth?"

I shrugged. "Plenty, but I've no idea. Pick a number."

The detectives drove off with their prisoners and we started home. The penny would be held as evidence, but eventually returned to the citizens of Kiner. Unless the Mint demanded it back, that is. Mac speculated that it *wouldn't* be returned to the time capsule and monument when it was repaired.

I suggested an auction through a coin dealer. Mac liked the idea and said he'd take it up with the mayor. "The city could use the extra money."

We drove in silence a long while. Then the inevitable happened. But it was Mac, not me, who said it.

"A penny for your thoughts."

I leaned back and relaxed.



*Stan Percival was busy doing what he does best—complicating and possibly ruining lives . . .*

# BACK WHERE WE'VE NEVER BEEN

by  
**WILLIAM  
BANKIER**



Stan Percival and I were in our tiny office upstairs over the food market on Ste. Catherine Street in Montreal. We were in our accustomed positions: Stan resting his 240 pounds in our folding garden chair and I seated at the desk before a silent typewriter. There was no work going on today.

Percival was busy doing what he does best—complicating and possibly ruining our lives.

My name is Joe Huck. I'm a Baytown boy who came to Montreal and made good, then bad, then fair, and right now simply awful.

"Joe, be a good boy," Stan said placidly. "Go up to the house and ask Marlene for the coins."

"You go," I said. "She's your wife—more or less. And it's your coin collection."

"Marlene always liked you better than she does me. That's one reason we separated." Stan rose from the chair and it sighed with relief. After the disastrous episode of our selling the Jacques Cartier Bridge to E. J. Lewicki (which was the first time Portia Fleming betrayed us) Stan had kicked the chair to pieces. It was a dead chair. But next day he went at it with pliers, wire, and a roll of friction tape—and behold, it lived again. We call our chair Lazarus.

Now, from his height of six feet four inches, Stan said to me, "If I show up, Marlene will ask me for a support payment. You go. Sit in the kitchen, drink the tea, eat the brownies; then tell her we need the coins for photography. We're doing an ad for the Bank of Montreal and it wants a photo of old coins."

This sounded plausible enough. Now that the sit-com series we'd been writing was defunct and we no longer had our CBC income, the team of Percival and Huck had been reduced to creating advertising on a freelance basis. "I suppose Marlene will believe that," I said.

"Coming from you, she'd believe anything." He put a hand on our telephone. "I'll ring her and tell her you're on the way."

"How do you know she's home?"

"She's always home on Tuesday morning. She has nothing at the clinic on Tuesdays." Marlene is a speech therapist at Montreal General Hospital.

"And you'll be down at the Rymark Tavern drinking up all the beer," I said.

"No, sir. I'm booked to pay a call on Darius Calhoun. I need him in my plan."

"That failed filmmaker? I thought he was finished in this town when he used wooden wieners in that hot-dog commercial."

"He's into a different kind of filmmaking. I'm meeting him at the Gladiator Motel on Upper Lachine Road. Come there with the coins after you've seen Marlene."

I groaned and got to my feet. We made a mismatched couple, I in my shirt and tie and \$200 sportjacket, Stan in his faded jeans and stained t-

shirt. "All right, I'll go. But it's a mistake for you to sell the coins to raise money for this foolish scheme of yours."

"Not foolish, friend Huck. If I can win back Portia Fleming and destroy E. J. Lewicki at the same time, I'll be laughing. Not to mention the potful of cash we'll earn out of your friends at the Baytown radio station."

"Not earn—steal," I said. I had worked for CBAY years ago, before coming to Montreal. "Those are my buddies."

"Then they can only wish to share a little of their prosperity with you." Stan ushered me to the door and I felt like a toy soldier in the hands of a large boy. "Off with you," he said. "Jump into a cab and go see Marlene."

"Cab? I'll take the bus," I said. "That's why I dress like this and you dress like that."

I rode the bus into NDG to have my important visit with TGFS. NDG means Notre Dame de Grace and TGFS means Too Good for Stan—my private label for the desirable Marlene Percival. It was a warm morning in early July and the bus windows were open. I half dozed during the twenty minute ride, thinking of the vaguely criminal activities we had pursued since Stan became involved with Portia Fleming. An old Chinese curse says, "May you live in interesting times." I was ready for a dull six months, but I wasn't going to get it.

The Percival house was of faded grey stucco. Six dwarf elms that had once been trimmed in globular shapes lined the front walk, three on either side. Now they were overgrown with spiky shoots growing straight up like fright wigs. As I walked between them, spiderwebs adhered to my face.

Marlene answered the door looking like the cover of an expensive magazine. Loose shirt with only two buttons working, tight slacks, bare feet. The expression on her face was anxious. "Hi, Joe. Is everything all right?"

I realized Stan had not telephoned ahead. "Sorry, Marlene, your husband was supposed to warn you." I followed her into the cozy house, smelling coffee, cigarette smoke, and femininity.

"He didn't." We were in the living room, not in the kitchen where I wanted to be, with coffee and conversation. Marlene threw a yard of chestnut hair across her shoulder, balanced one bare foot on a sofa cushion, and embraced herself inside the flimsy shirt. It was no way to treat a man who has always loved her the way I do.

"Was it something in particular, Joe?"

"The coin collection—Stan's father's box of old silver. He wants me to pick it up and bring it downtown."

She made a gruesome face. "Come on, he hasn't sunk that low—he's not selling the coins!"

"No, no," I lied. "We're doing an ad and we need the coins for a photograph."

She seemed to think it was plausible. "O.K., I'll get the box."

She went to the dining room and opened a door in the sideboard. The coins were in a wooden container the shape of a cigar box, only deeper. A chair scraped on the kitchen floor. We both heard it and looked at each other. Her frown was like the flicker of a bird's wing. Then she smiled and said, "Come and meet Ivor."

Well done, Mrs. Percival, I thought.

In the kitchen, I shook hands with Ivor Stacey. He was tall and loose, with corn-silk hair and china eyes—sort of early Lloyd Bridges.

Marlene said, "Ivor is one of my speech-therapy students. He came round this morning to have some individual tutoring."

"Tha-tha-tha—that's r-r-r-right," Ivor said.

I gave them full marks for improvisation, but I was in a bad mood so I said, "I'll let you get on with it. Mustn't impede the progress of speech therapy."

I gave the coin box a shake. "By the way, are you getting a grant from the government?"

Marlene half smiled. "What?"

"To help with the cost of running a boarding school."

"I don't follow you."

"Well," I said, "I was the first person up your path today. So Ivor must be sleeping here."

"What are you talking about? I told you he came round this morning."

"If that's true, he must have crawled. Because when I walked between your dwarf elms just now I wiped out all of last night's spiderwebs."

I arrived at the Gladiator Motel in a taxi, a worried man. Had I known a worried song I would have been singing it. I knew something now which I would have to keep from Stan. If Stan learned that Marlene was shacking up with Ivor Stacey he could hire a lawyer, achieve a divorce, and stop paying support. This would hurt Marlene. Or would it? She'd lose the



cash payments but she'd gain the right to marry Ivor the Terrible if she so desired.

The Gladiator Motel was a roadhouse restaurant with a line of cabins on weedy gravel. I went into the office and asked a plump girl made of cake with pink and silver icing where I could find Mr. Percival. She had never heard of him. Then I recalled that the affair would be in the name of Darius Calhoun and was told to proceed to cabin ten.

Cabin ten was detached from the others, a shabby clapboard structure with shuttered windows. I entered, blinking in the glare of photoflood lamps. Somebody said, "Kill the floods," and the light died to a sordid gloom. I could now see a bed, a girl with a sheet drawn over her, and a young man in motorcycle boots and a German helmet.

Stan took my arm and drew me to the wall. "Did you get it?" I handed him the box. "Darius," Stan said, "do you want to see the coins?"

A rotund man with a large head fringed with pink hair turned and I recognized the notorious film director. "Hold it a second, we've got a little hang-up here." He turned to a bearded chap in army fatigues holding a sixteen-millimeter camera. "Gregory, can we do another take?"

I nudged Stan in the ribs. "Come outside and let them get on with their work."

"Don't you want to watch?"

"Not really. I don't mind looking at a blue film if it's well made, but being behind the scenes is a little disenchanting."

"I know," Stan admitted. "It's like watching them hook up the wires to Peter Pan."

We went outside and stood behind the cabin looking down on the railway freight yards. I was feeling downtrodden and confused. "Stan, what's happening to us?" I asked. "We used to be the semi-prosperous writers of a TV series. You had a lovely wife who hated you and Portia Fleming who didn't know you that well. I was buying new clothes every week. The rent was paid on that broom closet we work in. We drank almost as much beer as professional wrestlers and life was paradise. Now here we are, hanging around waiting for a defrocked commercial hack to finish shooting a skin flick so we can scrounge some money off him."

"We want more than money from Darius Calhoun," Stan said. "He's part of my plan."

"Yeah, but what happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened. E. J. Lewicki turned the tables on us after

we sold him a perfectly good bridge. He went back to Baytown, taking Portia with him. That's what changed our luck."

Stan was referring to our first great con, the sale of the Jacques Cartier Bridge to the Baytown construction magnate. It was an imaginative caper involving our actor friend, Yves Paquette, doing his famous impersonation of the Mayor of Montreal, and for a few hours we seemed to be ahead fifty thousand bucks. But then we learned Portia Fleming had decided to stick with Lewicki and we ended up short two hundred plus expenses. "The guy leads a charmed existence," Stan said. "I felt sure we'd nail him when we invented 'Battleship' Potemkin."

Our boxing con was based on the knowledge that Lewicki and his son Harvey wanted to produce a heavyweight contender and thought they had a candidate in Mace Renfro, the terror of the local taverns. We provided the opposition in the person of "Battleship" Potemkin who, we told them, was a Russian Olympic boxer escaped from behind the Iron Curtain but who was, in reality, the disgruntled Israeli immigrant, Asher Malkov. But, again, we didn't nail him, Lewicki nailed us. And this time Asher Malkov ended up with the girl.

"I'm not finished with Malkov," Stan said. "I hope he returns with Portia when I lure her back from Israel."

"I don't see why you want her back. Let her go."

"And do what?" Stan asked. "Move back in with my loving wife?"

I thought of Ivor Stacey camping out at the house in NDG. "No, you can't do that. So I guess we have to go ahead. Wherever that is."

We walked back to the cabin. Darius Calhoun introduced us to his cameraman, Greg Porchester, who said "How do" in a London accent. Stan wanted to know when and where we could talk business.

"Come to my place," Darius said. "If your plan is so unspeakably exciting, you may as well have a glass of sangria."

The Calhoun residence was a massive structure with gables, dormer windows, a tiled roof, and a screened porch with a magnificent view of the city beyond the tops of a row of northern maples. Darius lived here alone except for the times when he had a house guest. Right now it was Greg Porchester.

"These are fabulous coins," Darius said, looking at the assortment spread out on a glass-topped bamboo table, "but I don't think I'd be interested in buying them from you."

“Who said anything about selling them? I want you to lend me some money with the coins as security.”

“How much money?”

“A paltry five thousand,” Stan said.

I coughed on a throatful of the red wine and citrus mixture. The sound conveyed something to my partner.

“I’ll accept two,” he said.

“I have two thousand dollars,” Darius said. “But it isn’t paltry, it’s splendid. Is that the two thousand you had in mind?”

“The very same,” Stan said, striving for humility but achieving only a tone of weary disdain.

“Then I’ll consider it. But what I really want to know about is this fantastic scheme of yours.”

“It’s so good I’m almost afraid to tell you. It involves the production of a great Canadian romantic film shot in a small Ontario town and directed by the one and only Darius Calhoun.”

Darius inhaled. He was silhouetted against the skyline and I saw his globular shape increase in size like a blowfish. But I knew my predatory friend was about to swallow him anyway.

“What’s the property?” Darius said. “Do I know the writer?”

“You’re sitting beside him.”

“Joe Huck?” Darius looked at me with respect. “You’ve got something good on the fire, Joe?”

I had to admire Stan’s diplomacy. He had said nothing to me about this part of the scheme, knowing that every writer in the world has one or two epics on the shelf. There was no way I could refuse the crown he was offering.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t know how great it is, but it’s a story.” Into my mind strode the ghost of My Great Work, tried as a novel, as a television play, as a stage play—but never successful. “It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.”

Darius seemed impressed. “Fabulous. But who’s going to finance a feature film?”

“No money problem,” Stan said, the way the captain of the *Titanic* might have said there was no lifeboat problem. “I happen to be a very good friend of E. J. Lewicki, the Baytown construction magnate.”

“Almost too good to be true,” Calhoun mused. He tapped his foot and hummed to himself. He was gay; he was overweight, but he was not

stupid. "What's in this for you, Stan?" he asked. "Joe gets his story filmed, I get an Academy Award—what do you get besides the loan of two grand for these coins? Which you have to pay back."

Stan didn't miss a beat. "There will be other activities. Which reminds me, Joe, isn't it time you telephoned your friend at the Baytown radio station?"

This was the part of the scheme I *had* been told about. I got out the slip of paper with Richard Resnick's telephone number on it and hoped I'd remember the story I had rehearsed. I went to the telephone and they all trooped after me like kids who can't let Mummy out of their sight. It was after office hours, but I was sure Resnick would be on the premises; he'd been that sort of program director when I worked there, and why should he change?

"CBAY, good evening," said a bright female voice down the line.

"May I speak to Richard Resnick, please? Montreal calling."

The telephone clattered. "Richard Resnick speaking," the familiar voice intoned.

"Hello, Redneck, you old tyrant," I said. "It's Joe Huck down in Montreal."

Resnick had never much liked my calling him Redneck but I had started it at a drunken party and he'd pretended to be amused and now he couldn't go back on it.

"What gives?" he retaliated. "Are you still in jail?"

"Never was, never will be. This is a preliminary call to say that my partner and I will be in Baytown in a day or so and we'd like to come in and see you with a proposition."

"The guy you write the series with?" Baytown hadn't yet heard of our cancellation.

"That's correct—Stan Percival. And the idea in a nutshell is this. You know how popular our series has been on television. How would you like to present a radio series on CBAY, especially adapted by the authors?"

Resnick was silent for a moment. I had surprised him. Finally he said, "That's a lot of actors as I remember. I saw a few episodes."

"Not to worry. Think of the lift for the Baytown Theatrical Society. They'll play all the parts except the female lead. We're bringing her with us." I glanced at Stan, who nodded, his thoughts in Israel with Portia Fleming.

"We're talking about a lot of money, aren't we?"

"No problem. Stan and I will do the scripts for a moderate fee. And we have an idea for a local sponsor to pick up the tab."

"Sounds neat," Resnick said. "When will I be seeing you?"

"In a few days. I'll call you when we arrive in town. We'll be staying at the Coronet."

We declined Calhoun's dinner invitation, left him to entertain his friend Gregory, and went outside where we hailed a cab. "I'm going home to see Marlene," Stan said.

This was dangerous. What if Ivor Stacey was still there? "You don't want to see Marlene," I advised him.

"Yes I do. We're off to Baytown soon. I want to secure the home front."

"What about Portia?"

Stan's amnesia could be turned on and off as it suited him. "Portia was Brutus's wife," he said.

The cab rolled down out of Westmount and through the part of NDG where the Italian gardeners live. The lawns were immaculate, hedges as regular as if hewn from green granite. Under artificial light, rock gardens glowed with petunias and marigolds. Eventually we arrived at the stucco cottage—I for the second time that day.

The house was dark. "Nobody home," I said. "Let's go downtown."

Stan got out and wandered up the path between the dwarf elms. I followed him, sensing spiders watching me from the shadows, their little machines all loaded for another night's spinning. I also imagined Ivor and Marlene shackled up in the bedroom, the sands of their lives rapidly running out. "I'll pour you a drink," Stan said as he unlocked the door. "You can wait with me till she gets home."

We went into the living room and looked at a large open-reel tape machine sitting on the coffee table with a microphone plugged into it. I said, "Marlene must have been doing some homework."

Stan turned on the machine and we both sat down. Marlene's voice came from the speaker as the reels turned.

"Relax, Ivor," she said, "and let's try to pick up where we left off." There was something not very academic about her tone.

Ivor's youthful voice came on. "You're a beautiful woman, Marlene."

"I'm supposed to be helping you with your impediment."

"Y-y-y-you sure as hell are!"

I leaned forward to push the OFF button but Stan told me in a sharp

voice to leave it. Before the tape ran out, a car arrived outside. Stan stopped the machine and got up to stand facing the door.

Marlene came in first, glanced at Stan, and turned to me. "You didn't waste any time telling him," she said.

She was tousle-headed, her makeup a little sketchy, her eyes wide and excited; I had never seen her look so beautiful. "You've got it wrong," I said. "I tried to keep him away."

Ivor came in, long, loose, and tanned—he might have just parked his surfboard on the lawn. "Hello," he said.

"You must be the famous Ivor," Stan said. "I have everything you ever recorded."

"Bastard," Marlene said. "That tape is part of my work."

"I wouldn't mind having the distribution rights," Stan told her. "It should outsell *The Happy Hooker*."

She swung at him and Stan grabbed her wrist. Ivor took a step forward. "Don't hurt her," he said. Marvelous—no stammer under pressure.

Stan pushed Marlene aside and confronted his enemy. "Let me warn you, sonny boy. I am inches taller than you and I must outweigh you by sixty pounds. I've hammered more guys in my day than you've had hot dinners. So my advice to you is, get out of here before I lose my temper and start bouncing you off the walls."

Ivor Stacey did not attempt to reply to this overpowering argument. He just did a very simple thing. He threw a right jab across a distance of ten inches, landed it on Stan's jaw, and my friend went down like a felled maple. All over: Dust and silence.

Marlene screamed, "You've killed him!" She knelt beside her husband, cushioning his head on her knee.

Ivor crouched beside her. "He looks O.K."

"Get out of here!" she snapped at him. "Haven't you caused enough trouble?"

It was the worst thing that could have happened: Portia Fleming was on her way back from the Near East to tempt E. J. Lewicki, and now here was Stan making up with his wife. As the front door closed behind Stacey, I looked at Marlene, who was rocking and crooning over my partner's unconscious head. "Do you really want to get the misery started all over again?" I asked.

"Cynic," she snorted. "For a writer of tacky romances, you certainly don't have much faith in the happy ending."

A few days later we arrived in Baytown. I was surprised we had managed the two hundred miles in Stan's old car. It had a hole in the floor beside the driver's seat through which I could see the highway racing past. As we drove up Front Street and parked in front of the Coronet Hotel, we were struck by the carnival appearance of the main drag. Strings of pennants and colored lights ran from one side of the street to the other as far as the eye could see. The bellboy who helped us inside with our luggage explained. "It's Old Home Week."

The crowded conditions saw Stan and myself put into a room with twin beds. We unpacked and then I telephoned Richard Resnick. He sounded cold. "Listen, Joe. This radio series—there'll have to be sponsorship money up front."

"Don't worry. Money is what you'll have. My partner and I are on our way to visit the local backer now. We'd like to come and see you this evening."

"Come at six-thirty. I'll have done the evening news."

Stan made the second call, confirming with the Lewicki residence that we would be out to see E.J. within the hour. Then we went downstairs and into the beverage room for a pre-meeting beer. Our waiter was Davey Conrad, a familiar face from my old days before I left home for Montreal.

"You still staging fights?" he asked as he served the beer. He was remembering our promotion last year when Mace Renfro had met "Battleship" Potemkin at the Arena.

"We've got other things on the fire now," I said.

Davey took his money and before he went away advised us to keep our eyes open for Renfro. "He still hasn't forgiven you guys for making a fool out of him in that fight."

"That's nice," I said to Stan. "Now we have to worry about Renfro—as if Lewicki wasn't enough."

"Lewicki is enough," Stan said. "Drink your beer and let's go see him."

I had driven the car the first time we went to Lewicki's a year ago. This time Stan knew the way. As we drove across the Bay Bridge I looked down through the hole in the floorboards. "You realize this car leaks," I said.

"That's the emergency brake. When I give the signal, put your feet through and drag your heels."

After a few miles, we entered the main gate of Lewicki's country palace. Its size was impressive. Stan parked under the fronds of a willow tree

and we were on our way to the front door when a familiar voice called to us from the side of the house.

"Over here, boys. We're on the patio."

We moved onto a flagstoned area landscaped with young trees and a stream of water flowing over a descending bed of rocks. It was no more ambitious than any other government park. There were picnic tables under the trees and, nearest us, a flotilla of recliner chairs, three of which supported the bodies of our reception committee.

"Hello, Lewicki," Stan said. "I've come to give you one more chance to skin me."

"I've had you twice and I'm still hungry," our host replied. "Good afternoon, Mr. Huck."

I am a local boy and I grew up with the magic of the E. J. Lewicki reputation for making money. "Nice to see you again, sir."

"Thank you. You know my son Harvey, I presume? And Mr. Renfro?"

The two younger men looked at us without affection. Harvey Lewicki was as I remembered him—tall and beefy, the product of a lifetime of too much good food, sunshine, and fresh air. Mace Renfro's copper skin was the same, and those Mohawk eyes the color of Lake Superior on a cloudy day. The difference was in his expression. At the time of the fight he had worn a shy smile that cancelled the menace of his size. Today he looked at us as if we were the strangers who had poisoned the water hole.

Stan was taken aback by the boxer's presence. "I'm surprised you feel you need a bodyguard against non-violent people like us," he said.

"Mace isn't here to protect me," Lewicki said. The tough old man sat there all tanned under his crisp white hair, talking around a long cigar. "He's here to keep Harvey from killing the pair of you."

The younger Lewicki said, "You made me a laughing stock with that farcical boxing match, Percival. One way or another I'm going to do you down."

"Hold it, Harv," his father said. "Let's find out why these two scoundrels have come back to Baytown."

Stan drew up an armchair and sat facing Lewicki at a distance of one yard. He looked him in the eyes and said, "Twice my partner and I have tried to fleece you. Twice you've outwitted us and left us high and dry. This third time can only be in an attempt to even the score, right?"

"Right." The rich old pirate laughed in his belly.

"Well, I won't lie. We certainly do need money. But we mean to get



it legitimately this time.” And then, as Lewicki watched him with merry eyes, Stan told how the CBC had ended our television contract and how we planned to produce the plays as a radio series over CBAY. The venture required sponsorship and Stan proposed that Lewicki Construction would benefit from taking it on.

Lewicki kissed his fingertips and tossed the caress into the air. “It’s beautiful. You’re setting me up but I don’t see the sting. I’m sorely tempted to go along. But there’s something boring about a drama series on CBAY.”

“One moment. You haven’t heard who’s going to be the star of the series. We’re importing her specially from Israel. The famous international beauty, Portia Fleming.”

“She’s coming back?”

“Could be here as soon as tomorrow.”

“That puts a different complexion on the matter,” Lewicki said. “I’ll sponsor the show provided Portia does in fact return and that she stays out here at my place.”

“Done,” Stan said. “We save one hotel bill.”

We were driving back across the Bay Bridge when I said, “I suppose I’d better get at my film scenario if we’re going to ask Lewicki to put money in it—”

Stan was in a breezy mood. “Don’t break your neck on that film script, old friend. It’ll never be made.”

“What?”

“That whole idea was just a ploy to get a film crew here so I can involve Lewicki with a girl on camera.”

“Dirty movies? With Lewicki and Portia?”

“That’s what Darius Calhoun makes.”

My mouth tasted as if I’d been sucking a handful of copper coins. “Darius makes pornies because he’s been reduced to it. He dreams of doing better.”

“And I dream,” Stan said with venom, “of going to that old pirate and saying, Pay up—or I’ll release a certain piece of film to the next Canadian Legion stag.”

I stared into Stan’s face. He neither looked nor sounded like my old friend. I wondered if Ivor Stacey’s knockout punch had done some damage to the wiring inside that big head.

"O.K., that's Calhoun's dream," I said, "and yours. What about mine?"  
"Tell me about it."

"You started it. Back in Calhoun's living room you turned me on. That play has been in me for a long time and now it's begun growing. I'm pregnant, man. And I want this baby."

"Sorry, old son," Stan said grimly. "What you're getting is an abortion."

At six-thirty we arrived at radio station CBAY. Richard Resnick came out of the studio and shook my hand. "Meet Stan Percival," I said, "the man who taught me how to write a funny script."

Resnick led us to his office, gave us drinks, and we did a lot of casual bantering, avoiding the showdown. We were about to embark on an ambitious voyage into uncharted waters and nobody wanted to hoist anchor. Finally Stan said, "Well, I suppose you'd like to hear about the local sponsor we've lined up for the drama series."

When Stan mentioned E. J. Lewicki's name, Resnick was impressed. The project came alive and he began talking about how soon we could begin rehearsals.

"Don't forget," Stan reminded him, "I'm importing the female lead. Portia Fleming is flying in from Israel."

At that moment the desk phone rang. Resnick answered, listened, smiled, and said, "A young lady at the desk for Mr. Percival? Send her in."

As he put down the phone, I said, "She's right on cue."

Stan got up and went to the door. "I left word at the hotel we'd be here in case she arrived." We heard a tentative tap and Stan opened the door wide, bowing low and facing us as he said in the voice of a nightclub MC, "Here she is, direct from exotic Tel Aviv, the girl with the heavenly body, the lady we all love to love, the one and only Portia Fleming!"

And in walked Marlene Percival with her smile on sideways.

I gave Marlene marks for the way she responded to Stan's faux pas. She treated it as one of his jokes, although it was obvious he'd really been expecting Portia. Stan was so relieved he invited us all to dinner at the Coronet.

The meal was almost over when Portia Fleming showed up at the hotel, having taxied extravagantly all the way from Toronto International Airport. She was wearing a tight-fitting suit made of yellow plastic and held to-

gether by clever little zippers a few inches long. A bushel of blonde hair fell in a rich wave which she had caught up and tied with a flash of crimson ribbon. She sat with us for dessert and coffee while I telephoned the Lewicki residence and ordered a car. Marlene looked pleased. She didn't know E.J.'s financial support depended on Stan's agreement that Portia would stay at his place.

We talked on and soon Harvey Lewicki showed up with the car keys in one hand. In the two minutes that elapsed before he led her away, he seemed to have become her best friend.

"I'm glad she's gone," Stan lied. "She wouldn't even be in the series except Lewicki insisted," he lied again. "That's what comes from getting involved in a legitimate enterprise." Three lies in one speech—a new record!

Three days later we drove across the bay to visit Lewicki and discuss my script for the feature film. There had been a rebellion. I'd threatened Stan that unless the project went ahead he could find himself a new partner. Like most accomplished liars, he knew the truth when he heard it. I'd been working hard in the small room down a back service hall to which I'd been transferred when Marlene moved in with Stan. She'd never stopped apologizing and she did so now from the back seat.

"I don't see how you can work in that closet, Joe."

"No problem. All a writer needs is room to change his mind."

"I could have placed you at Lewicki's," Stan said.

"No, thanks. He's got Portia. And, since yesterday, Darius Calhoun and Greg Porchester. Not to mention son Harvey and Mace Renfro. I'd never get any work done." I ate some jumbo redskin peanuts from a pound bag I'd bought in town. I offered them around. They both refused.

"Lewicki always feeds us," Stan said. "Why spoil your appetite?"

Mace Renfro let us in. The big man's eyes looked haunted. Maybe hunted is a better word. He ushered us into the lounge and was gone without a word. Lewicki was sitting with Portia, son Harvey, and Darius Calhoun. Greg Porchester, we were told, was in town arranging the rental of camera and lights.

We accepted drinks. "What's the matter with Renfro?" Stan asked.

"With everybody," I added. There was a gritty tension in the room.

"There's been a theft," Calhoun said. He looked embarrassed. "I

brought your coin collection with me, Stan. After we finish filming here I'm going to Toronto to see some people. A man I know is a numismatist."

"Keep away from him," Portia said.

"Coin specialist," Lewicki informed her, blowing a kiss.

"I intended to have the collection evaluated," Calhoun went on, "and, depending on his opinion, I would have made you an offer to purchase."

"So?" Stan inquired. He was disturbed, but with his plot underway he didn't want to make any waves.

"The coins are gone. Stolen. And it's pretty certain Mace Renfro took them."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because Portia saw him lurking near my room this morning," Calhoun explained. "And when he saw her, he looked guilty."

"What does Mace say about it?" I asked.

"He denies it," Lewicki said, "but I've called the police anyway. Let them talk to him. They'll sort it out."

We heard the sound of a car in the yard. Portia was nearest the window. She stood on tiptoe, one heel swinging back prettily. "It's the police car, E.J.," she said.

Two uniformed men came into the lounge, followed by Portia who had gone to answer the door when it became obvious, after four rings, that Mace wasn't going to do it.

"The man you've come to apprehend seems to have made himself scarce," Lewicki said. "He's probably in his room. I'll go get him."

When he came back to tell us Mace's things were gone from his room, there was a general spilling of people from the house as if we expected to find the fugitive standing on the front lawn. I walked to the far side of the house. "Over here!" I yelled.

They came in a shambling stampede, the lord of the manor drunk before midday, the cops embarrassed, the rest of us pleasantly excited. "Do you see what I don't see?" I said to Stan.

He said, "One of our cars is missing."

"What car, sir?"

"A 1961 Hillman, battleship grey." Stan gave the officer the license number.

"You left the keys in your car?" Lewicki groaned. "That's asking to have it stolen."

"It's the sort of car you hope somebody will take," I explained.

The police got into their cruiser and went away, one of them radioing a description of the car as they departed. Lewicki and guests began to drift back toward the front door, all except Stan, who was under the willow tree looking at the ground. "You folks go ahead," he called. "I want to have a word with my partner."

I joined him under the fronds and when we were alone he said, "The vanished car has a message for us."

"Come again?"

He pointed to the gravel yard.

I looked and saw a scattering of jumbo redskin peanuts on the ground. "We got rid of the cardboard patch," I mused, "so the hole in the floor is uncovered. And my bag of peanuts was overflowing from the glove compartment."

"That is correct, sir. Let's see what the peanuts have to say."

Stan led and I followed a distinct trail of peanuts taking us not toward the front gate but past the far side of the house, past a two-car garage with its door raised to reveal a Jaguar and a crimson Chevrolet, and along some fifty yards to a solitary outbuilding standing silent, its green door buttoned down. The peanuts stopped here.

"Isn't it poetic?" Stan said. "We find the elusive Mohawk by following a trail of redskins." He tried the handle on the green door but nothing happened. We went to the side of the shed and found a dusty window with a hole in it the size of a baseball. Through it we could see the Hillman parked in shadows. Stan spoke into the hole.

"Mace, we know you're in there. Nice try, but no cigar."

Silence.

Stan continued, "You have a choice. You can open up and talk to us or you can keep quiet and Joe will run up to the house and get the cops back here. I suggest you let us in. We're the only friends you've got right now."

Mace Renfro rose from the far side of the car. "O.K., come to the door," he said.

He let us in and we closed the door behind us. We leaned against the Hillman and for a minute or so nobody said anything. The shed was warm and stuffy, smelling of sunbaked boards and half-empty paint tins. There was a lawn roller in one corner and a circular frame on the wall held a coiled green garden hose. The mandatory fly was on duty.

"Well, Mace," Stan said, "what's the story?"

"The girl is lying. She tried to get me to make a pass at her the first night she arrived. I stayed clear. I know trouble when I see it."

"Full marks for perception," I said.

"She didn't like being turned down. So when the coins disappeared she pinned it on me."

"I believe you," I said.

Stan said nothing.

Renfro sighed, a childish sound from a very large man. "For a while last year I thought it was coming right when they told me I could box that Russian heavyweight. Then it turned out to be just another put-on. He wasn't Russian at all and soon everybody was laughing and getting on a plane."

Stan put a hand on Renfro's arm. "We had no intention of hurting you. That scheme was designed to bring down Lewicki. He's the man we're out to get. So you have nothing to fear from us. In fact, we'll help you."

"How can you help me?"

"Sit tight. We have to go back to the house, but we'll figure out a way to get you out of here."

On our way to the house, I said, "Where do you suppose we can take him?"

"Directly to jail. Without passing Go or collecting two hundred dollars." My face must have advertised my feelings. "Come on," Stan said, "this is the chance of a lifetime. We're trying to set up Lewicki. With Portia here and all the talk of films from Calhoun, he's beginning to forget we're the enemy. This can clinch it. If we discover Mace's hiding place and deliver him to the cops, Lewicki has to believe we're on his side."

"So you're going to walk in there and say the poor guy is hiding in the shed? After the pep talk you just gave him?"

"Of course not," Stan said. "What do you think I am? I'm going to wait till we've had some lunch."

My briefcase sat on a table in Lewicki's lounge. All I had to do was let the old millionaire read the outline inside, priming him with a bit of enthusiasm, and we'd be in business. The money for the film would be made available, Darius Calhoun would be given the go-ahead, my dream would begin to emerge as the reality of a feature film. But despite all this, I knew what I had to do. I had to scupper this latest mischief of Stan's.

The trouble was, I had no clear idea of how I could stop him. All he had to do was tell Lewicki that Renfro was hiding in the shed. Short of beating a hole in my partner's skull, I could see no way of preventing it.

We joined the others as fresh drinks were being poured. Stan knew me. He seemed to sense I was like a stoat in a trap. "As soon as we're settled down," he said, "I think Joe Huck should read us the scenario for his film. Marvelous stuff. You're going to want to back it, E.J. And only Darius Calhoun can direct it."

He had brought me to my moment. All that was required of me was that I sit down and do as I was told. Instead, I remained standing, refused the drink Portia offered me, and ad-libbed, "Marlene, you have to go back to Montreal tomorrow. What say I take you for a scenic drive before lunch?"

Marlene looked surprised and pleased. "I'd like that, Joe. But hasn't your car just been stolen?"

"I was hoping Mr. Lewicki would let me borrow one." I turned to the old man. "Not the Jaguar—I'll settle for something more modest."

The guests laughed and so did Lewicki as he took a set of keys from his pocket.

"Take the Chev," he said. "But don't be too long. I'm anxious to hear this story of yours."

I picked up my briefcase and handed it to Stan. It was a perfect hostage; if I left my precious outline with him, I couldn't be going far. Outside, I hurried Marlene to the garage and as we got into the Chevrolet she said, "This is nicer than morning drinking. Thanks for rescuing me."

"Not only you," I said. She puzzled over that as I drove the short distance to the shed, got out, and performed a tricky rap on the green door. It opened a crack and Renfro showed me an eye. "Come on," I said. "I'm getting you away from here."

"What's up?"

"My esteemed partner is about to double-cross you," I said. "Let's go."

"Why would he do that?"

"For his own reasons. Mace, don't linger. He may be calling the cops right now. We have to get down the road."

Saturday night in Montreal. The drive from Baytown had taken three hours at top speed. Persuading Marlene and Mace to come along was easy. She had to be back in Montreal for work on Monday morning and

Mace had no place else to go except the Mohawk community at Deseronto outside Baytown, which was where the police would look first. So we collected Marlene's things from the hotel and away we went.

When we arrived, we arranged a room for Mace at the Central YMCA on Drummond Street. If Lewicki decided to send the police after him and they made a serious search, they'd find him sooner or later. But it would be sooner if we billeted him at Marlene's house.

We said goodbye to Mace and drove up to NDG. The house was dusty, stuffy, and silent. We stomped about, switching on the radio, plugging in the coffee pot, running faucets, creating the illusion that there is intelligent life on Earth. "Well," I said, "it hardly seems like a little over a week ago."

She was watching me with a look in her eyes that could have been fatigue but might also have been affection. She said, "Has anybody told you, Joe? You're a very sweet man."

I came to her and locked my hands behind her waist. She brushed my cheeks with her lips and I said into her fragrant hair, "Come here often?"

Her hand rested against the back of my neck. "I feel like I could use a shower."

"So could I."

"I turned the thermostat down before I went away. There'll only be enough hot water for one."

"You leave us no alternative," I said.

Much later, lying with her head on my shoulder, she read my mind. "Will it be a problem for you if Stan finds out about us?" I was silent, so she said, "I don't think it matters much to him any more."

"Ivor Stacey mattered enough for Stan to take a run at him."

"You aren't Ivor Stacey."

"Tha-tha-tha—that's what *you* think," I said.

The telephone rang by the bedside and I confirmed that I had turned a corner in my life by picking it up and answering. It was Stan. He had me hooked on 200 miles of telephone wire and was in a position to reel me in.

"Huck, old friend," he said. "How nice of you to take my wife home from the ball." His voice was flat. "I was the star of a nice fiasco when I whipped open the shed door to reveal—voilà—no prisoner inside."

"It had to be done."



"Don't apologize. I look good in scrambled egg." He paused for three beats. "I have a kitchen phone and a bedroom phone. Should I ask you to describe the pattern on my kitchen wallpaper?"

"Ask if you like. I just made love to Marlene."

"You'd better pray for an earthquake and hope the house collapses. Because when I see you I won't be that gentle."

"It's already happened," I taunted him. "A while ago, we both felt the earth move."

On the morning following this defiant conversation, I chickened out. With Marlene at the other side of the kitchen, breaking her pencil as she wrote a grocery list; I dialed the Coronet Hotel, got Stan on the line, and effected a tacky reconciliation. We needed each other, so maybe we ought to agree to tolerate each other a while longer. I didn't mention Marlene's name and, thank goodness, neither did he.

"So you'll figure on driving back today?" he asked.

"I thought I would."

"You must really want to do that film of yours."

"That's all I really want in this world."

"Right." His calm was deadly. "That's how I feel about clobbering Lewicki. So let's help each other."

When I left the house, Marlene was getting ready to telephone the YMCA. "We brought a frightened man there yesterday and dumped him," she said. "In case you've forgotten."

"Don't needle me about Mace. Without me, the Baytown cops would have him in a cell by now. You can needle me about everything else."

"Who wants to?" Said with the blasé air of a girl who learned long ago not to count on a man.

I drove back to Baytown in Lewicki's car, wondering how to play it with Stan. There was no material in my head worth rehearsing. I parked in front of the hotel, went inside, took the stairs two at a time, and knocked on the door. Stan let me in. He was toweling his face after shaving.

"I guess I can move my stuff from the other room," I said.

"Since my wife is back in Montreal," he said, "yes, I guess you can."

The balance in the scene we were playing was out of kilter. We had stripped off the old costumes and makeup and here we were, naked on

stage. I had a feeling the action from here on in might be more interesting for the audience but tougher on the performers. I wanted to clear the air about Marlene, but I didn't know how. I felt cheap and childish and about one-third a man; I wanted to be allowed to forget what had happened. As usual, Stan handled the matter.

"You took a big liberty with me, old son," he said. "You went to bed with my wife in my own house. And then you didn't even try to protect my feelings. You rubbed my face in it."

"I know. I don't know why I did that."

"It's no big mystery. For years I've been running your life, dragging you into my schemes, telling you first do this and next do that. You must resent it all to hell. So you had to get back at me."

"I suppose so."

Stan buttoned his shirt. "It isn't what you did that hurts me. It's your telling me on the phone."

"You knew anyway."

"Only because you didn't lie. A person can survive a whole lifetime on the proper lies."

The next couple of days went by with me working on my script and Stan making arrangements for the film session. He came to me on the second day and said, "We're all set for tonight. Sixteen-millimeter, black-and-white. Greg's rented the equipment and Lewicki's agreed to let us shoot at his place."

"How did you convince them all to go along?"

"No problem. I told Portia that your script calls for her to play several roles. She loved that. I went on to say that one of them is the part of a prostitute. She loved that even more. There isn't an actress in the world who won't jump at the chance to play a hooker. I said we'd want to do a test to see if she's convincing."

"How do you get Lewicki in the picture? You haven't told him you want to film him in bed?"

"Of course not."

"Then who plays the male role? Who's the john?"

"You are."

"That's crazy. Apart from the fact that I won't do it, you don't want me in this movie anyway."

"That's right. And I want you to revert to that position when the time

comes. Meanwhile, Lewicki will be nine-tenths sodden tonight when the camera's ready to roll. So we simply substitute him for the reluctant Huck. He won't know what's happening to him."

There was still a hitch. "How will you get Portia to go along? And Darius too, for that matter."

"I'll promise them it's only for the screen test. I'll tell them we'll destroy the print and the negative once we've seen how Portia handles the role."

It was time for us to drive out to the Lewicki residence. I was settling into the car when Stan hit me with a name I didn't want to hear. "I got a letter from Marlene," he said.

"That's nice."

"She's fixed Mace up with a job at Montreal General Hospital. On the maintenance staff. Mopping floors, I guess."

"All's well that ends well. Do you still think he took your coin collection?"

"When I go back to Montreal I intend to ask him."

"He's innocent."

"Maybe. I suspect everybody—Portia, Greg, even Lewicki. He could be holding the collection hostage against whatever action I may be taking against him."

"I never thought of that. It makes sense."

We allowed ourselves to arrive after dark. There was a mood of suppressed excitement around the big house. That happens when a movie camera is brought into a situation. Unexposed film promises a kind of immortality, and nobody can forget it.

The idea was to isolate E.J. and get him as drunk as possible before the filming session began. This job was mine. Meanwhile, Portia retired to her room to organize her costume and prepare herself emotionally for what she believed to be a legitimate screen test. Stan had given her a page of monologue shamelessly written by me in the knowledge that we weren't recording sound.

Harvey Lewicki went with Portia, saying something about helping her with buttons and hooks. There was a grim determination about the boy's progress with Stan's old girl friend, but I was too busy to consider it.

I found myself with our host in a small conservatory filled with potted palms and ferns under a slanting glass roof. Our glasses were full and the bottle and the ice bucket were easily to hand.

"That was a great supper, Mr. Lewicki."

"Glad you enjoyed it." He took vigorous pulls from the fat brown glass in his hand like a starving man biting chunks from the heel of a loaf. "You must be keen to get on with your film."

"I certainly am," I said. "And I have you to thank, sir."

He waved a flabby hand. "A little money—that's nothing. I envy you the activity. Years ago, when I was trying to get my construction business going, I always had things to do. These days nothing happens to me."

I tried not to think of how we were going to change all that in the next couple of hours. "You have Harvey," I said, reaching for the handiest cliché.

Lewicki made a face. "Harv intends to desert me. He's getting set to sneak Portia Fleming off to Toronto and set her up in some repertory theater there. I'm going to end up alone. I don't even have Mace Renfro to kick around any more."

When Stan came to get us an hour and a half had passed and Lewicki was incoherent. He was about five minutes away from unconsciousness. We took an arm each and supported him down the corridor and into the bedroom where Calhoun and Porchester had set up two floodlights. The continental bed was stripped to its fitted sheet, a stark white cube that put me in mind of a butcher's block.

We placed Lewicki in a chair and arranged his arms and legs so he wouldn't fall. Darius Calhoun drifted to Stan's side. "The sponsor seems in bad shape," he said. "He won't see much."

"He'll see the finished print," Stan said, and gave me a glance.

Portia came in with Harvey at her heels. She had gone all the way: black nylons and garter belt, plastic high-heeled sandals without backs, black mesh bra—the dream of every dirty old man in the world, including myself. She had procured a blonde afro wig that made her appear even more exotic, and the final nasty touch was a pair of gold-framed school-marm spectacles, tinted blue.

"How do I look?" she asked, passing close enough to me and Stan to stop our watches.

"You'll do, dear," Stan said.

I moved the plot along a phase, as we had rehearsed. "Stan," I said, "I don't think I can hack this."

"Of course you can."

"You'll have to get somebody else. I just don't see myself in this situation."

"Who else are we going to get?" Stan was good at these exasperation scenes. "I'm not going to do it. Greg's on camera. Darius is directing. Who can we get?"

I pretended to ponder. "Why not E.J.?"

"You're crazy! He won't do it."

"He'll never know. Look at him."

Stan allowed a light to dawn in his eyes. "It might not be bad. The lines you wrote for Portia suit a call girl with a tired old client."

Calhoun said, "But E.J. may not relish the thought of being in a scene like this."

"He won't know it's happening, as Joe says. The scene is only a test to see if Portia comes across as a hooker. Once we've settled that, the film and the negative go in the fire."

On came the lights and Stan gave Portia a hand getting Lewicki onto the bed. But when he said to Darius, "Roll it as soon as she begins undressing him," something in me rebelled. I grabbed Stan by the arm, said, "We've got to talk, my friend," and dragged him from the room. "How can you live with what we're doing in there?" I demanded.

"Ends justify means. The blackmail money will pay to make your film."

"I spent the last hour and a half talking to that old man. He's not a bad guy, and he doesn't deserve this."

"He must have said some nice things about your work. Crafty old creep." Stan's eyes took on the stubborn animal look that had been surfacing since the one-punch knockout at the hands of Ivor Stacey. "Twice Lewicki's left us up the creek in the past two years," he said. "I'm never going to forget that."

"Apparently not, you poor, vindictive, single-minded bastard."

When we reported back to the makeshift studio, they'd just finished shooting. Darius was snapping off the lights. Porchester had the camera in his arms. "I did some hand-held stuff," he said, "to make it more interesting."

"Fine," Stan said. "How soon can we have a print?"

"There's no lab in Baytown," Darius said. "It means we send it to Montreal."

"Not send. Take. Get in the car, Greg, and whiz down to Montreal. Put the film in for processing and bring it straight back here."

Greg was amenable. "I'll head off first thing in the morning after breakfast."

"Wrong," Stan said. "You'll have breakfast in Montreal. After you've seen the film processors."

A day passed during which Stan and I devoted ourselves to staying out of contact with E. J. Lewicki: We wanted Porchester to get back from Montreal with the film so we could screen it for the old man, hit him for a hundred thousand dollars, and run. So we spent that day shopping, cruising the streets, taking in a bad film in the afternoon, dining across the bridge after dark.

It was on the following day that things began to show signs of winding up in a civilized way. Stan and I were drinking beer in the Coronet beverage room when the door opened and in walked Lewicki. He came to sit at our table. "I've been trying to get hold of you boys."

"We've been pretty busy," I muttered.

"I know," Lewicki said. "I drink a lot but I don't go deaf or blind. And I don't suffer from amnesia."

My partner appears most calm when on the verge of panic. "What's this about amnesia?"

"I don't suffer from it. I remember everything that happens when I'm bagged."

"Aha" was all Stan said.

Lewicki's approach might have been a clever ruse to get us talking about what had happened, thus filling in some genuine blanks in his memory.

"I'd been wondering what the con is this time," Lewicki went on. "You rigged up this business of making a film from Joe's script just to get a cameraman in my house. And to get Portia there too. I pinned her down yesterday just before she went away."

"Went away? Where?" Stan was genuinely surprised.

"To Toronto with Harvey. Oh, yeah—he gave me a message. He said to tell you you've seen the last of your girl friend. Something about he who laughs last."

"Ha ha," Stan said flatly. "You say you pinned Portia down?"

"Yes. She claimed the filming was a screen test. That's what you told her and she believes it."

Stan was looking smug and mean at the same time. I knew what he was thinking. We still had the film and Lewicki was still going to pay.

The millionaire's eyes met Stan's. "And now comes the crunch, eh, Mr. Percival? When the film is processed, either I pay you a lot of money or you screen it in this area and I end up looking awfully silly."

"That's the idea."

"How much are you planning to demand?"

"A hundred thousand."

"Will the money go to back the production of your film, Joe? Or was that just part of the con?"

"My film is real enough. Your money gets it started. We'll need more, of course, but I hope to raise it from the Film Development Council in Ottawa."

"You won't need them," Lewicki said. He drew out a fat brown wallet from which he extracted a check. He handed the check to me.

I read the amount, in words and numerals. I read it again. "Two hundred thousand?"

"If you need more, let me know. I think it will make a great film."

I looked at Stan. "You realize what this means? We have a backer and a project for the next couple of years. We can stop scrambling."

"I hope it means more than that," Lewicki said. "I've liked you two right from the start. You sold me the Jacques Cartier Bridge. That was a hell of a thing to do. I loved it. And that phony Russian heavyweight you brought down here last summer, I had to go along with you just to see what would happen."

"But in the end," Stan said, "we got nothing but the humiliation."

"But we can change all that now," Lewicki spread his hands on the table, palms up. "I want something I can get involved in. Backing this film of yours may be what the last few years of my life are about."

That was when the door swung open and Darius Calhoun came in. He looked tense as he pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Before you say a word," Stan told him, "let me speak. We don't need the film any longer. When Greg gets back with it, we're going to destroy it."

"Greg isn't coming back with it."

"What do you mean?"

"He was crossing the street with the can of film under his arm when

a Montreal taxi knocked him over. He could have been killed, but he was lucky—if you can call a broken leg lucky.”

“Poor man,” Lewicki said. “Is he O.K. for treatment?”

“That isn’t the problem,” Calhoun said. “He’s resting comfortably—he just telephoned me from Montreal General Hospital. But he doesn’t have the film any more.”

An uneasy silence reigned for a few seconds. “Who does have it?” I asked.

“Mace Renfro.”

Stan and E.J. screamed the name together and then hushed each other like burglars in a Keystone comedy. “How in hell does he get into this?” Lewicki asked.

“Marlene and I took him to Montreal and checked him into the YMCA,” I said forlornly. “She got him a job with a mop at Montreal General.”

“The ship is sinking,” Lewicki said.

Darius Calhoun said, “That’s what Gregory told me on the phone. He said he was in Emergency when he recognized the big guy washing the floor. He knew you were anxious to have the film back so he gave it to Renfro, along with money for trainfare.”

Stan was livid. “Why give the film to Renfro? He’s the enemy! Greg knew Mace took off when he was accused of stealing the coin collection!”

“No,” I said. “Greg wasn’t at the house that day, remember? He was in town arranging to hire a camera.”

“O.K.,” Lewicki said, trying to calm everybody down. “What does Mace know? He’s been given a can of film and told to bring it here. He has no reason to think he can hurt me with it.”

Calhoun closed his eyes. “Greg told Renfro about the film,” he said like a sleepwalker. “He felt he had to warn him the reel was hot stuff so he’d take care of it. Mace said he’d take good care of it all right.”

“Let me get this straight,” Lewicki muttered through a vicious smile. “You boys made a pornographic film featuring Portia Fleming in Paris underwear and me half stoned and in my socks. Then you sent Greg Porchester to Montreal to get the film processed. And now he’s given the film to Mace Renfro, having first told him what it contains. Have I got it all straight?”

Darius whispered, “He also gave him traveling money.”

“Of course. And I trust he fixed him up with a list of independent film distributors.” Lewicki got up. “We’d better find Renfro before he has a



chance to show that film to anybody. Let's get going. You and I are Baytown boys, Joe. Tell your radio friends and I'll talk to the editor at the *Herald*. If Renfro shows up anywhere in the county, I have to get to him first."

We were packed into Lewicki's car and he was driving. "How did you find out where Mace is?" Stan asked, holding on as we cornered at speed and left town, heading east.

"Resnick tipped me off," I said. "He was one of the people Mace invited to the screening."

"Screening?"

Lewicki snorted. "The poor bastard doesn't even have a screen. He asked Morrison to bring that. And a projector."

"Morrison is the publisher of the *Herald*?" I said.

"That's right," Lewicki went on. "Renfro's told the media he's about to show a highly sensational film involving a well known local citizen. And they've got a head start on us. For all we know they're watching it now."

"Our only hope is to get there and impound the film before they start," Darius murmured.

"Even if they see the film," I said, "these are your fellow businessmen, Mr. Lewicki. They won't want to hurt your reputation."

Our driver's laugh was hoarse. "You haven't been told I'm planning to run for Mayor next year. Morrison happens to be a supporter of the incumbent. My part in this film will be widely publicized."

Deseronto is only a few miles from Baytown. We took a turn off the highway and followed a secondary road past a fork with the customary service station and a general store. From here we progressed onto rutted gravel and bumped along between copses of birch until we emerged near a clapboard farmhouse complete with tarpaper outhouses, rusted tin tobacco signs, and a line of ragged washing. A number of cars were parked in the yard below the porch. One of them was a panel van bearing the insignia of radio station CBAY.

A couple of copper babies watched us storm up the steps and across the wooden porch. They looked to me as if they had arrived only recently by way of the land bridge across the Bering Straits. The screen door slammed behind us and we found ourselves in a large room dominated by a portable cinema screen. A sixteen-millimeter projector stood on a table, its front legs resting on a telephone directory. Between these ar-

tifacts, seated on wooden chairs, were Richard Resnick, publisher Morrison, and a couple of men I didn't recognize.

Morrison spoke first. "This is a surprise, E.J. What brings you here?"

"Curiosity," E.J. said; bluffing to the end. "But I'm going to have to confiscate that film. It was made as a test for the motion picture Joe Huck is writing and which I'm backing. It's our property and naturally we don't want the public seeing it in its rough state."

It was a good approach. "That's right," I said. "Hopefully it'll be ready for the cinemas in a year or so. We'll send you tickets for the premiere."

"I didn't come all the way out here just to drive back again," Morrison said. "Start the projector, Mr. Renfro."

For the first time I saw Mace. He looked small and I wondered why. Then I saw the reason. It was the group of men around him, all of whom were six inches taller and thirty pounds heavier. His friends had smooth black hair and eyes like those of the babies on the porch. They stood with their hands free at their sides and I detected resentment in the air over trapping rights and the indiscriminate slaughter of the buffalo.

Stan said quietly, "We can rush them, Mr. Lewicki."

My blood turned to sewage and I was glad when E.J. whispered; "No. There's no use having my body wrecked as well as my reputation."

The projector began to clatter and the screen went bright, then dark; then on came the pictures. The audience sat in silence as a flickering shape moved in the rectangle of light. It could have been anything or anybody.

Somebody yelled, "Focus!"

I heard Darius say testily, "The focus is perfectly O.K."

But it was as if we were looking at underwater shots made in a polluted aquarium. I put my face close to Calhoun's ear and asked, "What's all the murk?"

"Vaseline."

"What?"

"Gregory puts vaseline on the lens. It gives a diffuse effect, sort of like old photographs. Very moody."

E.J. overheard this and he began to chuckle, a pleasant rumble in the chest like porridge coming to the boil.

The film rolled on as the sequence of amorphous shapes unfolded before our bewildered eyes. I recognized an ankle at one point and thought I saw a pair of knees. But just when the images began to assume a rec-

ognizable outline, suddenly we were looking at them through a cross-hatching of diagonal lines.

"This is where Gregory switched to a hand-held camera," Darius said. "He's shooting through a trellis. Those dark patches in the corner are the leaves of a potted plant I was holding in frame."

All ten minutes of the film was like this. When it ended and the window blinds were raised, Morrison said to Renfro, "Is that all?"

"I never saw it before. The guy in the hospital said it was—"

I overrode Renfro to say, "We told you it wasn't worth seeing. It's just some early test film for the movie."

As they trooped out of the house, Darius Calhoun's voice rose petulantly. "I don't think it's all that bad. There are some nice creative sequences there. I'd like to see it again."

We drove back to Baytown in good spirits. Lewicki insisted we stay with him as he continued across the bay to his house. He thought a celebration was in order.

A worried son Harvey met us at the door. "Back so soon from Toronto?" his father asked.

"Portia's gone, Dad."

"What happened? Did you lose her in the big city?"

"Not exactly. I came back to the hotel this morning and she'd checked out. No note or anything."

"So you don't know where she's gone."

"I didn't at first, but I do now. A travel agent called the room. He said the rare coins Miss Fleming used to pay for her ticket to Tel Aviv are worth more than was first estimated. They paid me a rebate."

Stan could not help laughing. "She's done me again," he said. "She stole my collection. I might have guessed."

"And used it to fly back to Asher Malkov," I said, koshering the wound with a generous application of salt.

It was a cold December morning. I sat alone in the cramped office on Ste. Catherine Street, reading the *Gazette* page by page, putting off the moment when I'd have to face my work. Stan, who had been leaving me alone most of the time since we came back from Baytown, was over at the CBC. There was some sort of project he wanted to discuss with them.

At last I had to put the newspaper aside and turn to my film script in progress. I read the last few days' work, which added up to about six

pages. It was terrible. It had become a morbid hash of biographical non-events. Who would ever pay money to see such a film?

What a fine mess I'd gotten myself into. Lewicki's generous advance was sitting in the bank waiting for me to complete a shooting script and hire a director. I was drawing living money from the account, writing the office rent check on it, lying to myself and everybody else when they asked me how it was going.

Just after eleven-thirty, Stan arrived. Hearing his heavy tread in the hall, I rattled out an inane sentence to conclude a boring speech delivered in a contrived scene by a cardboard character with no motivation. Academy-award stuff. Laughing academy.

"You look satisfied," I said, noting the smile on his face. "CBC must have said the right thing."

"They did." Stan lowered himself into the garden chair. "I said to them, how about Joe and me adapting our famous TV situation comedy to go as a radio series? They told me to forget it."

"You must feel terrible."

"Terribly happy. Now I won't have to chew that cabbage twice."

"But what are you going to do?"

"March with the regiment to relieve Khartoum," Stan said. "Beat Amundsen to the Pole. There are lots of exciting things I can do."

My mouth suddenly took over while my mind was still paralyzed. "Listen, I'm up against a stone wall here. Totally bogged down. I can't write this thing by myself."

Stan regarded me seriously. "I've been waiting for you to tell me."

"You knew?"

"I've been sitting in the boat watching you tread water, wondering how long you could stay afloat. You're a born partner, my son, and so am I. Get back in here where you belong."

A flood of adrenalin poured into my system. "Yeah, let's collaborate!"

"All we have to do is write a film the same way we did the TV series. Crash it out. Let's do it." Suddenly all my confidence came back. The ideas were there. They just had to be laid hold of.

The telephone rang for the first time in a week. Stan answered. He looked pleased. "Great to hear your voice. Yes, we're both here. No, I'm not mad. Listen, if you took them it must have been because you needed them. Come on up."

He put down the phone and told me it was Portia Fleming. While we

waited for her, we rambled on about the film, achieving more in minutes than I had managed in weeks working alone. We agreed the autobiographical premise was wrong. What we wanted was action, originality, with fun and fights and romance. What we wanted was entertainment.

Stan was pacing and talking and I was typing notes when the door opened and Portia Fleming walked in, tanned from the Israeli sunshine. "Surprise, surprise," she said. "Look who's back."

We looked and saw Asher Malkov filling the doorway, ducking his rough-hewn head to clear the lintel. "Shalom," he said. "No hard feelings?"

Stan approached Malkov. Big as my partner is, he had to reach up to put a hand on each of the man's shoulders. We all held our breath till Stan said, "Hard feelings? We need you, comrade."

Portia's face lit up, and that was worth watching. She said, "What did I tell you, Asher? I knew there would be something for you here." To Stan she said, "I knew Asher wanted to leave Israel but he had no money. I used the rest of your coins for airfare. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing. Lewicki has backed us with two hundred grand. Money's no problem."

"I come to you in fear and trembling," Asher said in his heavy, Old-Testament English. "In Israel I can grow oranges. Here I can do nothing."

"Not true," Stan said. "Here you can be a movie star."

Asher looked puzzled. "I like it," he said. "What is it?"

Stan quickly explained our financial setup, Lewicki's role as backer-producer, our work in progress. "And the script will be based on the adventure we shared last year. A Moscow taxi driver defects to the West. Two entrepreneurs take him over and present him as a Russian Olympic boxer. They promote a match against the world's heavyweight champion. The fight becomes instant box-office, the American versus the Russian, a multi-million-dollar adventure."

I could feel my fingers itching to get at the keyboard. "It might just work," I said.

"Work?" It's got everything!" Stan raved. "Action, suspense, humor, politics—"

"And love," Portia intruded.

"Yes, love!" Stan swung her off her feet, sending one shoe clattering across the floor. "So much love the world will stop needing it for the next ten years."

"Movie star," Asher Malkov said, trying his massive jaw at a new angle. "Movie star."

"And I've got the title for this film of ours," Stan said. "We'll call it '*Battleship* Potemkin.'"

"A great title," I said, "but you'll need Eisenstein's permission."

"You think so?" Stan said. "I'll ask him on our way to lunch. Eisenstein is the building superintendent."

The story isn't finished, of course. Stories never finish. They carry us along in a sort of spiral until we end up back where we've never been.

For the immediate future, we are confronted with the making of a feature film. With Asher and Portia and E. J. Lewicki all involved, it should be fun. If the opportunity arises, I'll tell you what happens.

As for Calhoun and Porchester, who made such a botch of the Lewicki film, I think I'll persuade Stan to let them have a go at the big project. We could afford a more professional director and cameraman, but Darius and Greg are our people. We began this journey with them and I think they should be kept aboard till the end. Under strict supervision, of

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# CRIME ON SCREEN

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by Peter Christian

In the spellbinding, labyrinthian *Eyewitness*, the premise is mesmerizing: the young janitor (William Hurt) of an office building wherein a murder victim has been discovered *pretends* he has seen something relating to the crime only so that he can get close to the glamorous television reporter—a cool, sophisticated woman played by Sigourney Weaver—who has captured his heart nightly on the video screen and now comes to him with outstretched microphone for an interview. To prolong his contact with her he lies—hints he knows the killer's identity—and by doing so precipitates them both into a dangerous corner. A delicious beginning to a clever (if somewhat too complex) mystery film which continues our genre's fascination with the image of the reporter as investigator.

The *television* reporter is of course a somewhat flashier new model of the old standard, looking crisp and assured for on-camera reports of sensational happenings. Sigourney Weaver, in researching her role, found, surprisingly, that reverse sexual assigning was now the norm: "Women reporters were always being sent to cover the grisly stories. Every time you see a closeup of blood on a subway platform, there will usually be a blonde with a microphone standing there. I guess news directors feel that having a 'delicate' creature in a tough environment makes for a better show." Women reporters can be determined enough to investigate stories of the greatest national import, as Jane Fonda did in exposing The China Syndrome. And, although trailed by cameramen and surrounded by

equipment, the new breed is still vulnerable: in the upcoming *A Stranger Is Watching*, directed by Sean Cunningham (who helmed last year's chilling *Friday the 13th*), Kate Mulgrew plays a TV newscaster unlucky enough to be kidnapped by a psychopath and held hostage in the tunneling under New York's Grand Central railway station.

Kate and Jane and Sigourney are all a far cry from the traditional cinematic reporter—brash, aggressive, hard-drinking, hat permanently grafted to head, outfoxing both police and corrupt bureaucracy in his determination to ferret out a story to (in those days of multiple editions) “stop the presses!” Indeed, in his engaging book called *Stop the Presses! The Newspaperman in American Films* (A. S. Barnes), Alex Barris etches a portrait of the reporter as romanticized by Hollywood across some four decades. Reporters are our surrogates at the important events of the day, linking us to the front lines of national life. Very often those events include crime and murder.

Indeed, the very first important motion picture to cast the reporter as hero was *The Front Page*, filmed in 1931 from the smash Broadway play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. As the setting was the press room of Chicago's Criminal Courts Building, melodrama themes could scarcely be avoided. Ace reporter Hildy Johnson is about to marry and quit his job, but editor Walter Burns rivets him with the prospect of a “scoop”—in this case Hildy has managed to hide an escaped anarchist about to be executed for murder. The movie set the standard for crusading, irreverent reporters and indeed has been filmed several times since—in one version Hildy changing to a newswoman played by Rosalind Russell.

Immediately after the success of the first *Front Page*, reporters and their “colorful” lives became a Hollywood staple. *I Cover the Waterfront* is only half remembered today as a haunting ballad; in 1933 it was a hard-hitting film based on the reminiscences of a real-life reporter, Max Miller, doing the San Diego waterfront beat for a local California paper—although his autobiography was considerably hypered for the screen, a procedure most headline-writers of that day (and this) would understand. The newsman—played by Ben Lyon—was given a romance with Claudette Colbert, whose father he must expose as a smuggler and cold-blooded murderer. The final scene, in which Ben cuts open the stomach of a huge shark in the hold of the father's ship to show the Coast Guard a smuggled Chinese alien hidden inside, was so queasy that many critics felt the film a trifle too hard-hitting.



The young Joel McCrea looked so earnest yet dashing in a crumpled trenchcoat he was often cast as newspapermen. *Adventure in Manhattan* (1936) has him nearly fooled by master criminal Reginald Owen when a big story about a stolen diamond breaks. He is quite memorable as "good, honest crime reporter" Johnny Jones in Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), pulled off his beat in the gang-ridden New York streets by a cagey editor who sends him to Europe—changing his name to the more imposing-sounding Huntley Haverstock—to give a fresh, unjaded viewpoint of Old World turmoil in the last days before the start of war, "weather permitting." Interestingly, this film too was based on the factual accounts of a famed newsman—Vincent Sheean's *Personal History*—but as the book was written half a decade before, very little of it resembled the up-to-the-minute melodrama on the screen. Hitchcock's wildly exciting film—filled with assassinations, double identities, intrigue, espionage, plane crashes, Atlantic rescues—was so successful it made the foreign correspondent a popular screen figure.

Reporters were also the heroes of more realistic crime films. *Call Northside 777* presented in almost documentary style the true story of a newsman who, coming to the aid of an old woman whose son has been imprisoned for armed robbery and murder, begins gradually to believe with the mother that the young man is innocent and devotes years attempting to free him. It was voted as one of the ten best films of 1948. Similarly in *Boomerang* (1947), Sam Levene portrays a reporter who helps a district attorney (Dana Andrews) clear an innocent man when a priest is murdered and a vagrant is accused of his death. The film won for Elia Kazan the New York Film Critics Award for best direction; it too was done in semi-documentary fashion, based on a *Reader's Digest* article. Both motion pictures presented a serious portrait of reporters, with none of the pressroom theatrics and newshound flamboyance of the prewar breed. Journalism on screen had come of age.

Stories, too, seem to be getting bigger and more troubling. Jön Voight in *The Odessa File* (1974) is a freelance reporter who uncovers in Germany a secret society of former S.S. officers; the film is based on a Frederick Forsyth thriller. Warren Beatty in *The Parallax View* (also 1974) showed how dangerous it might be for reporters to pursue a story too single-mindedly—in this case a suspected nationwide assassination conspiracy. Both dramas exhibit a certain paranoia and are perhaps as fanciful in their depiction of newsgatherers as the crimebusting cinema scribes of yore.

But it is still a delight to mingle with all those ink-stained wretches called "gentlemen of the press" who crowd the newspaper dramas of screen and television. They are a valiant lot. Casey, the crime newspaper photographer, and fighting editor Steve Wilson of Big Town's *Illustrated Press*. Newshen Torchy Blane, who in a whole series of mystery films could have given Jane Fonda competition as a feminist go-getter. The weary Carl Kolchak, working for that Chicago wire service, who kept stumbling only upon scoops involving occult horror and the supernatural. And heroic Johnny Jones—should we say Huntley Haverstock?—broadcasting a sharp warning in a London radio studio as bombs burst outside: "The lights are going out all over Europe. I don't know if you can hear me, but *keep your lights burning, America!*"

Amusingly, Alex Barris reminds us that Ronald Reagan himself played a reporter investigating a murder in *Nine Lives Are Not Enough* (1941). Not only does he solve the case—the dead man turns out to be a millionaire—but he marries the victim's daughter, who then appoints him managing editor of the paper. From there it's got to be just a short jump to governor and President.



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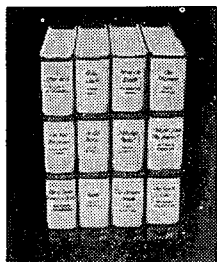
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